

Be You In Focus Webinar Transcript

Understanding School Refusal

School refusal is a complex issue for many children and young people, and it presents challenges for educators, who want to support the wellbeing of the students they teach. Understanding the reasons for and causes of school refusal assists educators to respond in a supportive and informed way.

Facilitated by Be You hosts Emily Schultz and Angelina Smith

Panellists:

Associate Professor Glenn Melvin MPsych, PhD. Deakin University

John Dean, District Clinical Leader, Registered Psychologist School Link and Got It! Programs **Matt Fromson,** Be You Clinical Lead, headspace Schools

Emily Schultz

My name is Emily and I'll be your co-host today on the team lead with our Be You New South Wales team. I'll be co-hosting this webinar today, along with my colleague Angelina Smith, Be You Clinical Lead, New South Wales. We're grateful to also be joined by a highly esteemed panel of guests will introduce to you in just a moment.

I would like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the Lands on which we meet today. We pay our respects to Elders past and present, and as an initiative with national reach we extend our respects to all of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait people across Australia from the lands that you're joining from today as well, welcome to any Aboriginal colleagues.

Today, as we go through the material, I encourage you to reflect and explore school refusal through a lens of the history of colonization and consider how ongoing inter-generational trauma could be a factor in school refusal for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in your learning community. And identifying this we embrace the strength of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and consider how kin, Country and culture may play a protective role and fostering a sense of belonging, for these students and facilitating their return to the classroom and promoting their attendance.

So what are we going to cover today, we are going to get into understanding school refusal. How do we identify what is it? And what are some of the contributing factors to school refusal? We will then go over to Angelina to learn about some early intervention strategies. So how do we notice inquire and provide support for students who may be at risk of school refusal? And then we'll share some practical actions and strategies and resources to support your concern, followed by a conversation with our panel of special guests.

Today we're joined by Professor Glenn Melvin, Associate Professor and Clinical Psychologist from Deakin University. Glenn has undertaken extensive research into evaluating the best support practices for students struggling with school attendance. He's also co-founded the Executive Committee of the International Network for School Attendance, welcome Professor Melvin.

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Also joining us today, we have John Dean, District Clinical Leader Psychologist working with Schools Link and Got it! Programs for the New South Wales Health in the Murrumbidgee Local Health District. Thanks for joining us today John.

Last but not least, we have Matt Fromson, our Be You Clinical Lead in Western Australia. Matt's a qualified social worker and counsellor and prior to joining Be You he was providing therapeutic interventions to young people disengaged from mainstream education.

Emily Schultz

What do we know about absenteeism and mental health well at a high level?

The evidence tells us that, on average, students with mental health conditions, significantly miss greater amount of school than their peers (who are not experiencing mental health concerns). We know there are serious consequences for academic performance, not to mention areas of child and adolescent development, social interaction, emotional regulation which can impact family harmony. When we are considering absenteeism in our schools, we really encourage educators that it is investigated through a lens of mental health and wellbeing.

And while we will see today that school refusal comes about from a complex set of circumstances and occur for a number of reasons. School refusal is related to mental health concerns and understanding this can really shed light into how we might best respond to the behaviour and support students to return to the classroom.

So exactly how do we define school refusal and how does it differ from other forms of absenteeism? The defining points of school refusal include a student who refuses to attend school or has problems remaining in class for an entire day. This can present in many ways, it can be extended absences from school, periodic absences from school, you might notice a student, missing classes; may be chronically late for school may also constantly plead to miss school; and experience an intense stress or anxiety just at the prospect of attending.

School refusal is most often related to mental health concerns and most often those concerns are anxiety based. And finally, parents and carers are aware of school refusal absences and no attempt is made by the student to really conceal their absences from those parents or carers.

You can see here there are some differences and points of differentiation between other forms of absenteeism such as truancy or school withdrawal. Truancy is typically concealed from the family, so it may be more of a choice that there's something else that they would prefer to be doing.

And there may or may not be emotional distress involved with truancy and it's unlikely that it's related to mental health. Whereas, then you have school refusal, which is where parents are aware of the absence and not attempting to secure attendance and mental health is not an issue. For example, it might be that parents/carers withdraw their child or young person for an extended school holiday or, alternatively, a young person is needed at home to support with household chores and therefore the parents or carers withdraw them because they need to fill those obligations for their family.

So, school refusal - key points: that differentiated mental health related absence is known to parents who are often but not always attempting to secure the child or young person's attendance and the child or young person doesn't attempt to conceal their absence. There are a number of indicators that you might notice when school refusal is occurring. Things like excessive worry, panic or cheerfulness even when children are young people are at school.

You might notice students have difficulty concentrating so for some it might be that it seems like they're easily distracted or maybe they're intentionally distracting themselves on their phone or via play to disengage from their surroundings. You might hear from them that there are physical complaints of illness so things like stomach-ache or a headache. And these can be very real for the young person, real symptoms that they're experiencing due to the amount of stress that they are having about being at school and the amount of anxiety that they're feeling.

There may be patterns of behaviour as well that you identify. For example, absences on significant days when there are tests or during a specific class. You might notice that they are frequently late, and this might be because it takes a lot to muster up the energy to get into school and make those moves to get into the

classroom or it could be that they're trying to minimize the amount of time that they spend at school because of the stress that it's causing them.

You might also notice that there's frequent unjustified absences that occur after holidays or after a weekend- after times where they've spent an extended period at home which make it harder to transition back into the school environment.

Transitions are a point of increased risk, where we might see more school refusal. Points of transition, such as going from primary to secondary school or, more recently, what we've been seeing with transitioning back from remote learning to onsite learning following or during COVID-19.

Other things that you may observe are requests to go to sick bay; students reporting they are struggling to get out of bed; withdrawal or social isolation frequent complaints about school. These may all be patterns of behaviour that you would notice by somebody who is school refusing. And what you notice and observe, as well as what parents and carers are noticing and are communicating to you, can really provide you with helpful clues to understand the factors that may be contributing to a student school refusal.

At Be You we've also developed to be the BETLS observation tool. BETLS stands for Behaviour, Emotions, Thoughts, Learning and Social relationships, which is a tool that can support you in recording your observations of cases of school refusal. By recording what you're noticing, you may be able to identify patterns of school refusal that are occurring. This can provide you, as well as your school's wellbeing team, with rich insights into the factors that are contributing to that behaviour, which is really valuable information.

As many of you know from your firsthand experiences; school refusal is really, highly complex behaviour. It's important to recognize that contributing factors will differ greatly from student to student. In addition to individual factors like mental health conditions, or mental health concerns, learning difficulties; individual experience of trauma, (as an educator you) really need to also look at that larger context of the child or young person. So, look at what's going on for them, with their peers, and their school environment and with their family.

How does their cultural background come into play, or what's going on in the community and that'll help us get a full picture of what's really occurring for the student. By investigating these underlying factors, we can begin to tailor our response plans to fit the needs of the individual.

One example, that really highlights the complexity of contributing factors is out of a child to school refusing in a rural community, and that was impacted by the 2019 bushfires. This child had frequent complaints of stomach-aches; a lot of panic was observed at school. The child was constantly asking to go home and a significant amount of stress within the classroom and he kept saying to staff over and over that he had to help dad mend the fence that is damaged in the fires, and he couldn't go to school. When the school spoke to the dad, that wasn't the case, the fence had been mended long ago and this just simply wasn't the case. After they started to investigate a bit further, this provided some clues around what was going on for that young person. There were safety concerns about going to school, there was fear of loss of family and being away from dad.

That underlying separation anxiety, and the experience of trauma from the 2019 bushfires so I share this as an example of how it really shed a light on the fact that there's not going to be a one size fits all solution for school refusal. And that school refusal is truly a complex issue that requires patience, keen observation, inquiry and a willingness to be flexible and how you respond to all its nuances.

We look forward to hearing from our panel about practical strategies that they've used, and they recommend for addressing school refusal and promoting positive attendance.

Before we do that let's go to Angelina Smith, Be You Clinical Lead NSW to learn more about how we can provide early support to those who may be at risk school refusal.

Angelina Smith

As Emily have given us an overview about some of the definitions and what we might observe with school refusal. What we want to start to do is to work out how can we practically support you have been your role as an educator.

At Be You we like to use the Notice, Inquire, Provide (N.I.P) model. This model provides a framework to engage and support the student, while remaining within your role as an educator.

The first part of the **N.I.P model** is **Notice**, that's noticing any kind of changes in behaviour or functioning; or any changes in absenteeism that you might observe. The observation of absenteeism and patterns of this will be really helpful, if it is identified as school refusal or if there is risk of school refusal present.

The 'I' talks to **Inquire**, about Inquiring and how we approach that student. It will be really important to try and facilitate some form of engagement, and connection between the student and the school.

Provide looks at seeing how we can provide support within our role (as an educator); how the school can provide support; but also considering what external supports are accessible to the student in order to help them engage back with the school.

The first part of the Be You N.I.P model is what are we Noticing, as we know that educators are really well placed to notice changes for their students.

What we want to consider with these changes is that all behaviours do serve a purpose and there is a reason behind that behaviour and what the student is doing. So here we've got a bit of an overview of three key theme that you might want to consider, if you do have a student that's experiencing signs of school refusal, or it has been identified as school refusal.

The first theme here talks to the avoidance of people or things at school that may cause distress. This might be specific teachers or students; areas within the school; subjects that call or that they find difficult or perhaps feel a significant amount of pressure within or even considering things like transportation to and from school.

The second overarching theme we put here is another avoidance strategy; and this is the avoidance of social interactions or performing in front of others at school. This might be group work, participating in sport, public speaking or attending activities involved with the school.

Unlike the other two, the third theme is about connection. A connection or seeking attachment to a significant other in the person's life. It's important to note when considering these, that the student may not even be aware. Often the student that's experiencing school refusal is responding to a level of distress that they're feeling, either physically or emotionally. So therefore, it can take time, a lot of patience, to be able to develop that self-awareness and understanding for ourselves, the student and the family or carer.

Where possible, we want to start to identify what theme, and specifically what behaviour is occurring in conjunction with any kind of health services that might be involved, or school counsel or other school support that are involved for the student.

The next part of the Be You N.I.P model is the 'I' and this talks about inquiring. How do we engage the students? As an educator we really want to establish that connection between them and the school. This will often have to be flexible and will take a greater approach; and can require some creativity, in collaboration with the students, to ensure they feel comfortable.

We've got some tips to stay within the boundaries of your role whilst you're inquiring and some strategies you can do to support the student within those boundaries.

The first one is encouraging help-seeking and help-taking behaviour. There are a variety of different health services and supports that are available. It's important, as an educator to seek to identify what they are to yourself and your community. This is looking at not just what's available locally, but also having a look and being familiar with what's available online either by education services, forums and helplines as well. Knowing these is important. This is because unfortunately, we might not be able to get the student into the service that we think is best for them straight away, or the student might not be ready for that level of engagement. So, we might need to take a graded approach to that help-seeking behaviour.

It's important that within your role you're documenting your concerns; documenting what you're seeing and what you're noticing really helps to provide that holistic care for the student. It's important to consider what is and isn't working and if we've got these concerns documented we've got a much clearer picture of what's happening for the student and what strategies we have tried, in the past. This also becomes important if we do engage with external services. Having the documentation when we've got consent to share that information can really support to aid in their planning as well.

Confidentiality is important in keeping our students feeling safe and like they can trust us in conversations. However, it is important that they know and are aware that confidentiality is conditional, so we do have to honour our roles as a mandatory reporter, and you ensure that we're not promising that we won't tell

anybody ever, because sometimes we know that we do have to disclose this information in order to keep them (the student) safe.

So, preparing for the conversation when you are inquiring with a student, it can help to have a plan going into it to alleviate any kind of stress or anxiety that you might be experiencing in the lead up to that.

In preparation consider Who, What, Where

Who: Who is best position to have that conversation, and here we are really looking at who from a school's perspective, who does the student feel comfortable and safe with. But also consider from a student's perspective the who. It might not be the student in those initial conversations, the student might not be ready to have the conversation. It might be a family member or identified support person for them that they've chosen.

We also want to consider, who they might not want in that conversation, at least initially, where we're trying to facilitate connection and engagement, we do want them to have some autonomy over that.

What: What do you plan to say? We want to go in with a plan to have ourselves feel comfortable (with the conversation). The school will have needs and goals that they need to meet. But we also need to consider what the student wants to get out of it; their goals and their readiness to engage in the conversation. That will really be important to heighten the student's engagement and connection to the school. You might want to consider ways to integrate conversations about their strengths and their interest to start to facilitate that connection.

Where: Where is about considering the location of the conversation, this might be physically or online. Physically we're looking at ensuring that it's a safe place, it's a place that the student does feel comfortable. Also consider we'd be sharing this information with the student prior to them coming into the school. This would reduce some of that uncertainty for them, and any chance that we can to reduce uncertainty will be important for them to feel comfortable as part of that conversation.

We know that we've moved online over the past 12 to 24 months and that student are now feeling a little bit more comfortable in that online space. This is something we can actually use to our advantage, when we're inquiring, if we have students that feel more comfortable that type of engagement, so we might look to doing phone call or video conference. If we're looking for a platform, such as Zoom, we might start with having conversations with cameras off and we just have a chat. The next session, we might put cameras on to say 'hi', then give a wave and then have cameras off. We might build that in a graded fashion, based on the student's pace and what they're ready for.

When: The when is talking about the timeline, when are we going to have this conversation? It's important for you as an educator to consider this and be mindful that you're giving enough time to the conversation and that you're not going to get the pulled in different directions when you've organised for that conversation. This is also a really great opportunity to provide choice for the student, so we might be asking them, 'when do you prefer to have the conversation? Is it in the morning; in the middle of the day, or in the afternoon.' Providing choice will help them feel a sense of control about their plan and to feel like they're a part of the conversation.

How: The how really talks to those conversational skills. This is something that schools and staff members are innately very, very good at. So this is something where we just want you to be more mindful, of regulating yourself, considering your pace and looking for opportunities or any signs of engagement from the student, because we really want to be able to capitalise on those.

The last step in the Be You N.I.P model is to the **Provide**. How can we provide support and remain within our role as an educator? An educator's role is really to observe those changes and make those changes known. So, it's important that schools have a clear referral pathway. This will be important to ensure that students are accessing support as early as possible and it's also really helpful for staff wellbeing. We don't want staff to feel like they're having to hang on to those concerns or feel overwhelmed as to what to do with them.

When we've got clear referral policies, we're able to support the staff member and support the student as early as possible. The next step talks about engaging in appropriate outside-of-school-services, so this would likely be a form of mental health support or potentially a General Practitioner (GP).

It's important to note the service that the student is able to access, will be dependent on the intensity and the urgency of the concerns that they're experiencing, as well as the availability of services. If you do find that you're getting stuck in a bit of a holding pattern or students are on a waiting list we'd be looking at some

of those more 'soft-entry' points or 'soft entry' services. For example online psycho-education programs or forums, helplines or online counselling support that might be available.

When we do have other services involved, we want to, where we can and when we planning to bring those services together. You might have heard of this as being called a complex case meeting. It's a meeting where we have all parties involved that are supporting the student, this is really important for consistency of care and to ensure that we're providing that wraparound support for the student. Where we can and, where appropriate, we want to invite the student in if they're comfortable, or at least have them know that these meetings are occurring, and what the discussion is about. That's important; especially for our secondary school students, so that they feel like they are part of the process, and they do have some control over the conversation.

The final point here in terms of providing support talks about engaging the student's family. We really want to have them as part of the process. We need them to be part of the process in order to have that wraparound care for the student providing it is safe to have the family involved. We do want to acknowledge that we understand there are challenges in engaging the family, in terms of approaching this (the topic of school refusal) and consider using the N.I.P model and how that model might apply to the family.

So, what are you noticing when we're having these conversations? Inquiring about what they might need and considering their mental health to see their understanding of where they're at and what supports, we might need to add to the family in order to support them, in supporting the student.

I'm now going to have pass you back to Emily, she's going to ask some questions of our panellists.

PANEL SESSION:

Emily Schultz

Thank you, Angelina for providing us with the framework to be thinking about **Notice, Inquire and Provide** when we're working within the school refusal context.

Let's turn to our panel and get to some of the questions that you've submitted through the Q and A feature during this webinar.

Welcome Glenn, John and Matt, thank you so much for joining us today. We're really looking forward to learning from all your experience. I know there's been a tonne of questions coming through with themes around the practical strategies that educators can use to support a safe return to school, how can we promote to maintain attendance, overcoming some common challenges.

One of the questions that has come through and it's a follow on from what Angelina was talking about with Notice, Inquire, Provide. What are the early signs of school refusal, but how might they differ between the primary and secondary setting? So more specifically just looking for some details. Glenn, would you be able to take that one.

Associate Professor Glenn Melvin

Sure, and Emily thanks very much. I'm coming to you from the land of the Boon Wurrung people of the Kulin nations, and it's great to be here today.

And so, I guess, one of the first things to discuss is differences in the way emotional distress might sort of manifest as was mentioned earlier, and we can see a lot of anxiety associated with school attendance in those who refuse. In children, Primary School age, and we might see more separation problems, having difficulty being away from their primary carer. And lot of somatic or body complaints of anxiety, the stomach aches and headaches sort of coming through.

In adolescence, and we can see a greater sort of social anxiety and difficulty with peers often being a trigger for school refusal. And I guess you know adolescence is a time where the social environment, peers, is very important and there so that's developmentally kind of consistent if you like.

In adolescence as well, we can see not only anxiety, but sometimes depression as well and kids or teens feeling very sad or flat. And when you speak and connect with these teens get this 'oh I boy, this sense everything so heavy and sad for them'. And for them, it might be feelings of hopelessness about the future;

with that developing brain, one can now consider a future. And if that's looking bleak, why bother coming to school? And for teens it's very important to think about their pathway through schooling and beyond. So there, they are building a reason to come to school and work on their education.

And I think, the social difficulties are interesting in that for some, they can have, long term sort of issues with friendships. They are always sort of a little bit on the outer and this might be sort of a warning sign. But then sometimes ruptures in friendships happen very suddenly and all of a sudden someone's been frozen out of a group and they're not feeling comfortable to come back into school.

We can see that in the teen years, and across the age spectrum we can see difficulties at home if parents have separated and or there is disorganization of sorts at home or lack of routines that can also contribute.

I think, though, we might think about, 'well gee there's lots of kids who are anxious and there are lots of kids who don't have things perfect at home'. So where does that leave us in trying to spot these kids? Well, it can be difficult and particularly when school refusal has a very sudden onset. So what I looked to is when a number of these factors are adding up and perhaps there's been difficulty with the schoolwork, perhaps they've been at sick bay by a lot lately, as was mentioned sort of earlier.

I might take an extra look and inquire sensitively about what's been going on for that young person. So there's some ideas about those early warning signs.

Emily Schultz

Well, thank you for sharing what you know from your experiences and what you've been seeing in terms of those early warning signs, I think one thing that you mentioned, there was having a number of factors add up over time. I think you used the words 'this can sometimes happen when it feels like there's a bit of a bleak future' or that they feel like that might be the case.

Which is a good lead into the next question that we had as well, which is given our current context of COVID-19 and returning to onsite learning. Has that impacted what we're seeing in terms of school refusal? And what has been the impact of that and maybe I'll go to one of our other panel members and then Glenn if you want, you can chime in. John how about we go to you?

John Dean

Thank you, yeah, it follows on nicely from what Glenn was talking about because students have different experiences of the restrictions, lockdowns etc around COVID. I know of students who have some situations, where students were attending school right through lockdowns because their parents were in essential positions, and they needed to be at school, and loved that quieter atmosphere at school. And then, when all the other kids came back, that was a real challenge for them. And they actually started to not attend school, so gradually getting some of those children back into that busier environmental setting could be helpful.

But of course, we've got children as well, who have fears about what COVID might mean for their parents, their grandparents. And so, they're fearful of being at school because they're away from their parents and grandparents who might be impacted by COVID or I may hear discussions about possible infections and children carrying COVID to family members and so forth. So, it's really important that children and young people are getting really clear factual information to help them understand all of those complexities, I guess. I think that covers it, basically we need to be having conversations with children and young people about the fears and working those through with them.

Emily Schultz

Yeah, absolutely John. Was there anything that either of you Matt or Glenn you wanted to add to that?

Associate Professor Glenn Melvin

John summed it up well, I think that, listening to the kids and understanding their experience and their fears is critical.

Emily Schultz

Beautiful, yeah, absolutely. Well, that brings us to the question, How do we then make the return to school feel safe for our students and how do we go about doing that and facilitating that sort of environment or planning?

Let's hear from you Matt, given your experience in the space.

Matt Fromson

Thanks, Emily for having me: I guess when I reflect on my experience of working in schools, I kind of categorise the ways we can work, or help create a sense of safety in probably three main categories or steps you can take. I think, it probably echoes some of what you and Angelina has said.

So, I guess the first one for me would be in terms of making school safe. It would be, being a safe person ourselves. Relationships are key, even though it sounds simple. I think we need to focus on our relationship with the young person and, if possible, the family as well. We're very unlikely to get a young person back to school if we can't build some kind of connection and sense of trust with that young person. So I guess that for me, that's the key.

And I think it starts with those basic skills, things like active listening skills. Am I truly listening to that young person? Am I giving them the time to talk through their concerns? Am I paying attention to them in a culturally safe way? Am I reflecting back what I'm hearing and asking those open questions and really trying to understand? Also, we need to normalise and validate what their experience. For example, you might say, comments like:

'Oh yeah... it makes so much sense to me why you find it hard to attend school'.

'Doing tests is really tricky' or

'School can be really tough sometimes'

So really empathizing and showing understanding for the students and or young person's concerns. And I think as well, often it depends on the young person, but sometimes young people will have particularly with families a lot of issues going on, or if the school refusal has been kind of entrenched, they're probably heard a lot of difficult messages attached to their refusal. So sometimes very well-meaning parents can get very frustrated with their child or young person and say a lot, without meaning to mean messages or there can be some name calling. Sometimes students are called lazy. I suppose depending on the child, sometimes they come from really unloving or unsafe environments.

We want to be the people who are speaking life to those young people. It's like we're almost like their biggest cheerleader and encouraging them, that we have hope and faith that they can pull through this and actually attend school. It certainly might sound really simplistic, but I feel like the relationship part is the best place to start in creating that sense of safety.

The second place would be, is that, we need to kind of explore what the underlying reasons are like. So a bit like what you and Angelina have described; if we don't understand why this young person wants to avoid school, it's going to be really tricky, it's a bit of an uphill battle in terms of getting them back into to school.

I guess you know, is it COVID? Is it, unfamiliar at school at the moment? Is it bullying? Is it performance anxiety? Are they socially anxious?

And I guess the conversation we can be quite tricky and sometimes the educator can find that out, and sometimes that needs to be assistance from a mental health professional. What I have found as well, is that when I've had these conversations with children and young people, sometimes they're not always clear about why they avoid school. So, they might go 'oh I you know I feel....'. They (the student) might have an awareness that they have uncomfortable emotions about being at school, but they don't necessarily know that 'oh it's because this is, and this, and this '. Or that these are the reasons why I don't come to school, so sometimes by us having the conversation we can crystallize that for them as well.

Some other people are really clear about why they avoid school. And I guess also getting the students to talk through what or how they would like things to look. That can also be a useful question, in terms of helping them to work out what the underlying reasons are. If they say 'Oh, I just wish that I had more

friends', that straightaway gives you some clues about what you know what we might be working with in terms of underlying reasons. And that brings me to the third point or category of action which would be making a plan.

I think of a plan as being like three different areas;

One would be like school-based strategies that staff can implement that would be family if you had the family on board and want to be the young person having their own strategies so. If we get the family involved as well, I think we have a greater likelihood of success.

Examples of school-based strategies can be things like; having regulation or timeout zones, it can be colouring in, it can be rewards, it can be a bit of a plan of action of how they're going to cope in the classroom setting. Also, doing things like adding warm referrals. So, if you happen to have that connection with that young person and you want to connect them with a school counsellor or a psychologist in the school. I think it works a lot better if you go over or have a conversation with a young person first. And then say *'okay, how about I introduce you to so and so. He's a school counsellor'* and have a bit of a warm referral like hand over chat, I think that makes a lot less threatening.

Also, having an attendance plan. Teachers scaffold everything. We don't start with algebra in Year 1, we work towards higher levels of skills, so I think it's the same with attendance. If we start off with something in order to get this person through the door. Perhaps if they come three mornings a week, and we build on that. And I guess you want to find a "just right" challenge, you want to be doing something which encourages them to confront something anxiety or the issues they might be facing but you don't want to make it so overwhelming they won't even try. So it's having that "just right" challenge.

Family strategies are around educating the family, about how they might have those conversations, but not criticizing, not name calling. And being able to validate the young person's experience try not to make it inadvertently to reinforce being away from school, so if they're saying at home from school and playing games all day, it's probably not going to encourage them to go to school.

The individual strategies that student can use they might be formed with the school staff, or that could be in conjunction with a mental health professional, but I guess helping them find coping strategies, such as taking deep breaths or those kinds of things.

And I guess the biggest thing is celebrate any wins. In my experience, I think, like being their biggest cheerleader - jumping up and down – *'when you it was so amazing you came for three days'*, of saying *'thank you so much'*.

Emily Schultz

Thank you, Matt that was so much rich information and so much to digest. Thank you for those insights and one thing that I really loved; that I think really shone through and the strategies that you're putting forward is that these are all linked into skills that educators, are as you know innately very good at. The building of relationships, the communicating with young people, the scaffolding plans, and I think that can feel really reassuring that educators, in conjunction with wellbeing professionals are very well equipped already to be managing these types of concerns when they come up, and sometimes we just need a bit of that reassurance and reminder.

So anything else that you might add John or Glenn? Any other helpful strategies or approaches that you'd recommend to facilitate a safe return to school?

Associate Professor Glenn Melvin

I'll just add a couple of points there are following on from Matt's discussion of a plan, which I think is an important part. I think, within that plan it's helpful to develop a sense of predictability. Young people are perhaps feeling anxious to coming back to school. They like to know that this is going to happen and then this is going to happen, so if we can spell it out to them and say *'Okay, so I'll meet you at the office at 8:45 or pick you up there. We'll walk back to the classroom and then morning class we have this this and this and then it's recess.... And Johnny wants to play with you. Johnny's looking forward to seeing, he's missed you '.... and so forth.*

We create a sense of certainty and that can help with some a young person not feeling so out of control and as they come back to school. And I think with those plans not pushing too fast, too soon and is also an important sort of message. And that's okay that takes a little bit of time you're better off to have slow and steady rather than push it too hard, and things kind of fall over and you go back a few steps there. So just a couple of points to add there, and for that excellent and description Matt provided.

Emily Schultz

Absolutely, so I wonder then Glenn, maybe we can continue this here is what if a student refuses to engage in the strategies that we're putting forward and the recommended strategies around returning to school or maintaining attendance, what happens then?

Associate Professor Glenn Melvin

This is a common question that is asked, and my answer gets back to some of the principles that have already been discussed. I think, if young persons or students are not engaging in the strategies, we've missed something. We've missed something there, so I think we need to take bit more of a curious approach to perhaps understanding what might be happening, and it might be that a student thinks that the strategy doesn't address the problem that they have. Maybe there's a mismatch there for them. Maybe picking children they might need more support to be able to practice the strategies. If they've been given a breathing exercise and, they're more like *'how I do this'*.

You might have to think about who is able to help with that? Is a school counsellor perhaps able to provide some extra support there or can parents be skilled up to support the child with implementing the exercises. It might also be getting back to Matt's point about the 'just right' approach. Maybe the step was too hard. Maybe attending three days or for the first day, three hours of the day, or three periods is too much, we need to start off with – *'hey, come in for a meeting with a couple of teachers and just get a sense of what's going on in the classroom before we go to getting into the actual classroom'*, which can actually be a challenge.

And then again getting back to what Matt was saying, and here I guess we're talking about the child's strategies and with school refusal it occurs within systems. That occurs within the school system and a family sort of system, so we need to be thinking about supports for parents as well.

And then supports within the school environment and I think if the students are *seeing 'Okay, the school is doing this, and they're providing this, and mum's doing that'* there might be some more room for the child tend to start moving. And it might be that we have initially more traction working with mum or dad or carer.

I learnt from many years ago from a family therapist to think about who's the strongest person in the family? And put your effort there because they're going to be able to help get the leverage and perhaps get others going as well. So, I know from school professionals this can be very frustrating, and when there isn't that sort of progress that we've been hoped and I guess, it means things can go a little slower. But I guess I get back to my first point there about if the strategy isn't working, we need to really think about what's happening there, and have we missed anything.

Emily Schultz

Thank you, Glenn, I think that's fascinating, it's just a bit of a revisiting; redoing a bit of a reset it sounds like, and yeah just being curious as you said. Which is something that is a really innate skill of the education community, so again very reassuring to hear that.

I guess I'd want to throw it open to you now Matt or John, to see if there's anything else that you would recommend around maintaining or promoting school attendance? And how else we might go about that, is there anything you wanted to add?

John Dean

I guess, following on and very much agreeing that the relationship is key. We've got one thing in our favour I guess, is that anxiety is something that we have all felt. And unfortunately sometimes it's talked about is this

high prevalence problem that is easily managed, easily treated. Whereas in fact the anxiety can be usually difficult to treat in some people and can sort of maintain for years, and can be there right into adulthood, so understanding that, I think can be helpful, because we can use those experiences. Because a lot of us in these roles probably haven't had such a bad experience of school, but we can understand just how difficult it might be for these kids. So actually tapping into that experience and focusing on that experience of fear and anxiety can help us with that relationship.

Emily Schultz

Thanks John, absolutely tapping into that sense of empathy and relatability, I hear that as well: And that can be protective for ourselves as well, so thanks for that. I'd love to pick your brain as well, another question that's come through the chat John. How can we best support and engage families in this space? It's such a tricky thing to do, often with school refusal can be anyway. Do you have any sort of thoughts on that?

John Dean

Well, we can easily discount parents or carers as part of the problem rather than solution. And so often they are part of the solution and to encourage them as partners can be so helpful. So, like a one practical approach could be just to make a time within your day, whether it's the start of the day, end of the day... somewhere parents can contact you and you might have different ways of doing that. Just so parents feel part of the process. I think that's really important in terms of developing that partnership. I guess, we can ask ourselves, '*why would we choose to be at school*', so making school a really welcoming place, not just for students, but also for parents. And obviously, it's a different relationship with parents, depending on whether you've got children in primary school secondary school.

And you know we've all experienced that if we've had children and they're getting a bit older now. That you know they might be clingy when you drop them off in primary school early, but then, when you get into high school I can't wait to be rid of you. So that's a challenge as parents become more removed from the kid's experiences as they get older. So again, the parent teacher meeting can become really important as way of sharing information.

We've talked about the school meetings in Schools Link, where I work, we have a network across new South Wales and our role is often being part of those care planning meetings; supporting teachers, school staff and other services to get together, along with parents and share what's going on. And often that will find a way to progress in the situation so it's really, really important to be sharing that information and developing a common plan as to how you can approach the problem.

Emily Schultz

Thanks John. Absolutely, and I like what you said as well that we really need to go in thinking about the family as partners, and it can be easy to think about the challenges that sometimes that poses and that's actually one of the questions that has come in: *How do we manage if the family isn't supportive or maybe even enabling the behaviour?* How do we manage that? Glenn did you want to answer that one?

Associate Professor Glenn Melvin

Sure, and another one I've heard before. And my thoughts around this sort of circle back to those around when the child isn't engaging in their strategies. I think our first approach is to explore a little bit more and be curious and provide parents with perhaps more opportunities or another opportunity to sort of share what's happening for them. And reflect that back that you know things seem perhaps a little stuck and wondering if you're missing something and then providing an open opportunity for parents to sort of share.

I think parents might in current times be needing reassurances around school being safe for their child or teen. No parent wants to put a child in that situation that they perceive as being unsafe if that's COVID or bullying, for instance, so we need to make sure that we've sort of explored that.

I guess, also, some parents, we see; parents value education and across the continuum and I think discussions around the importance of schooling have a place in spelling out and what we know about sort

of finishing school and like in terms of, if you finish school, you have better health outcomes. You have better mental health outcomes and not surprisingly better financial economics outcomes as well.

For some in schools might feel comfortable in exploring and understanding what the parents' education was like maybe they didn't have the opportunities. Maybe their schooling finished prematurely and understanding this sometimes can provide a bit of leverage to understand the world through their eyes and might give you opportunity to talk about *'well, maybe we have an opportunity here, for your son or daughter to be the first to finish high school in your family'*, so building and turning that around into an opportunity for the family.

For some parents, they might be in a situation where they've fallen out with the school on some level, and we need a sort of a conflict resolution process to occur. It might need to be some support with that sort of a process. I think, it's important to document as we heard earlier, the efforts the school was made to address concerns and make reasonable sort of adjustments.

In a small percentage of cases there might be some parents who have an unconscious, or conscious gains that are occurring due to having a child or teen stay at home with them during the day. And this is obviously a sensitive thing that you need to perhaps explore with some parents what are the good thing is about having your daughter home. I remember one parent said *'we've never been closer than in that time when my daughter was home...'* so, for the parent, it was framed as good thing, there's a closeness in that relationship which is great, but it was coming at the cost of education.

So if there is an active sort of enabling, and I guess getting to the serious side for a moment and the preventing of a child attending school or forcing them to work or serve some other need, it might raise your concern about protective concerns. And I think these are the ones to escalate perhaps to regional attendance officers or similar sort of position. There might be role for protection for that child if schooling is being withheld from them. And, I guess here we're moving away from refusal, but sometimes there's blurriness and it's not always sort of clear. So, there might be room for those discussions, or a need for those discussions.

Emily Schultz

Thank you, absolutely. Before we move on from family engagement, Matt was there anything you felt like you wanted to add? (Matt shakes his head). No? All right, great. I think we've definitely covered a lot today, so we've got around seven minutes left here, when we're talking about school refusal, I know that it can put lot of stress and pressure on our education staff and school staff who are engaging and trying to get that student back to school. I'd love to hear from each of you, your top tips or how can the education community and education staff really look after themselves, while they're supporting their students as well. Matt did you want to kick us off for that one?

Matt Fromson

Sure, I think self-care normally starts with the things we know we should do, but we don't always do so things like exercising, eating healthy food, connecting with people that we love. Doing things which we find meaningful, I think that's a great starting point, but I guess in this particular space, I think the biggest takeaway for me has been having realistic expectations. I guess, we can only do so much, so we can focus on our connection with that young person their family, we can try and find out the underlying reasons; we can try to develop a plan, and it can all look really good. But I guess things don't always go to plan and people are going to make choices that we don't always like. And that's really hard, because sometimes we're dealing with families with lots of entrenched issues or there might be like transgenerational trauma can be a lot of things going on.

And I guess I have I've seen lots of successes, but I've also seen times where schools are working with the participation officers and child protection as a whole wraparound, an intervention going on, and it still hasn't worked. So, I guess having really realistic expectations is important because I think we're allowed to grieve when things don't work. But I think a great question that I've tried to ask myself with these kinds of situations is *'What am I responsible for here?'*... because in the end, all I can do is be responsible for my part, and then I can look, I have to let go of the rest. Because I can't take the burden for making this whole thing work, as there's other players in there.

Emily Schultz

Wonderful advice, thank you so much. John, what about you, what would you share?

John Dean

Yeah, well along with those things, I would say build yourself a support team, a support network of people around you, who you can go to when you are having difficulties. Who can help you? Even perhaps identify a mentor that you respect and can provide you with advice when things are not going the way you would like them to go. I think that would be really helpful.

Emily Schultz

Thanks, that's great advice and just having that person to debrief with and talk through the challenges; just that action itself of sharing and exchanging how you're going with that can be so helpful, I totally agree.

And what about you Glenn, any advice or top tips for how to care for self in this situation?

Associate Professor Glenn Melvin

It's difficult being third (speaker). Those are the exact to the points that I had, I think if you're not engaging in your usual sort of self-care, then it's time for review and absolutely, we need to understand what our role is, as a teacher, as a school counsellor or as a mental health professional and that's what we're responsible for.

I guess, sometimes, and as Matt was saying, we may not get the successes that we hoped but there still might be small gains that are made and things that the young person sort of takes with them and it's very hard, sometimes to know what those are. And I've heard people reflect back in the early 20s:

'This teacher believed in me'

'This teacher saw I was talented in writing'

'I went, you know, things went off the rails, but now I'm studying creative writing'

These sorts of things, so we can't, perhaps underestimate the power of some of these basic sorts of principles that we've been talking about, listening, actively listening to young people and making time for them, showing care for them, because those are the things that they can take with them. If we think about school staff, are so critically important, there's no other adult by law that children and teens are mandated to have contact with outside their own family. So, the trajectories can still be altered by some of these things, even if schooling isn't finished.

And I guess, we have to be realistic about not every kid is going to be able to finish school and, unfortunately, we wish it wasn't the case, but there's still some positives there that can be taken away.

Emily Schultz

Thank you, thank you so much, and thank you to all of you for your time today. We appreciate all your insights and experience and honesty. I've really found this whole conversation really illuminating.

Ends.