

## Relationship Between Refusal To School And Anxiety Among Typically Developing Children Of Age 12 To 15 Years: A Correlational Study

Shalini<sup>1\*</sup>, Dr. Pooja Kaushik<sup>2</sup>, Prof. Dr. R.K Sharma<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1\*</sup>Master of Occupational Therapy (paediatrics) student,

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Occupational Therapy, Santosh College of Occupational Therapy Ghaziabad,

<sup>3</sup>Dean Paramedical and Principal Santosh College of Occupational Therapy Ghaziabad

### ABSTRACT

**Background:** School refusal is a common issue among children, often linked to anxiety, which can manifest as fear or worry about school-related situations. This study aims to explore the relationship between school refusal and anxiety in typically developing children aged 12 to 15 years. Understanding this connection can help in identifying how anxiety influences school attendance and in developing early intervention strategies.

**Study Design:** A Correlational study

**Aim:** To identify the relationship between school refusal and anxiety among typically developing children aged 12-15 years.

**Objective of the Study:** To evaluate the relationship between school refusal (avoidance of school, escape from social situations, attention-seeking behavior, and pursuit of tangible rewards) and anxiety among typically developing children aged 12-15 years.

**Participants:** The study included 384 children aged 12-15 years. Informed consent was obtained from parents. Participants were included as per inclusion and exclusion criteria after taking Informed consent from the participants.

**Methods:** The study used a correlational design to examine the relationship between school refusal and anxiety in typically developing children aged 12-15 years.

**Result:** The strongest correlation was found between anxiety and avoidance behavior ( $r = 0.724$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), indicating that children with elevated anxiety are more likely to avoid school. Other significant correlations included anxiety with escape behavior ( $r = 0.586$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), attention-seeking behavior ( $r = 0.679$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and pursuit of tangible rewards ( $r = 0.614$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The null hypothesis (no correlation between school refusal and anxiety) was rejected, and the alternative hypothesis (a correlation exists) was accepted. Significant interrelations were also found among school refusal behaviors, with the strongest correlation between avoidance and attention-seeking behavior ( $r = 0.766$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

**Conclusion:** The study concluded that while anxiety does not directly contribute to school refusal, the strong interconnections between different school refusal behaviors suggest that a multifaceted approach is essential for addressing the issue.

**Keywords:** Adolescents, School refusal, Anxiety, Behavior.

### INTRODUCTION

School refusal is a complex and multifaceted issue that affects a significant number of school-age children. It is often seen as a response to emotional distress, particularly anxiety. While some children may resist school due to external factors such as bullying, others exhibit school refusal due to internal emotional challenges, most notably anxiety. Research shows that school refusal is most prevalent in children aged 5-11 years, with rates varying between 1–5% across different populations<sup>1</sup>.

In a study conducted by Kearney (2001), school refusal behavior was classified into four types: emotional distress, avoidance, seeking attention, and traumatic events, with anxiety being the most significant contributing factor. Children with emotional distress often present with physical symptoms such as headaches or stomachaches as a way of avoiding school attendance<sup>2</sup>. The impact of anxiety on school refusal has been well-documented, with numerous studies indicating that children with anxiety disorders are more likely to experience difficulty attending school regularly.<sup>4</sup>

Anxiety in children is one of the most common mental health conditions, and its impact on school attendance and academic performance is profound. According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), childhood anxiety disorders can manifest in various forms, such as generalized anxiety, social anxiety, and separation anxiety, all of which can lead to school refusal when left unaddressed<sup>3</sup>. Symptoms of anxiety may include excessive worrying, restlessness, and an inability to concentrate, which can significantly impair a child's ability to engage in school activities. If untreated, these conditions can persist into adolescence and adulthood, further exacerbating emotional and psychological distress<sup>4</sup>.

In terms of academic achievement, anxiety can disrupt a child's ability to focus, complete tasks, and engage in classroom activities. Children with untreated anxiety may show poor academic performance due to difficulties with concentration, poor memory, and an inability to participate in social learning activities<sup>4</sup>. For instance, research by Muris et al. (2000)

found that children with high levels of school-related anxiety tend to underperform academically because they often avoid situations that may induce stress, such as tests, presentations, and social interactions in school<sup>5</sup>.

Parental involvement is another crucial factor influencing school refusal behaviors. A study by Tonge and Bull (1996) found that parenting practices, particularly overprotectiveness and inconsistency, could contribute to the development of anxiety in children, which then manifests as school refusal<sup>6</sup>. Additionally, some children may experience school refusal because of separation anxiety, where the child feels an overwhelming fear of being apart from their parents, particularly their mother, which is common in younger children<sup>7</sup>.

An interesting area of research is the role of social anxiety and peer-related fears in school refusal. Studies have shown that children who struggle with making friends or experience social rejection are more prone to experiencing anxiety and ultimately avoiding school. For instance, a study by Rapee et al. (2005) highlighted that children with social anxiety tend to avoid social situations at school, which often leads to school refusal behaviors<sup>8</sup>.

Moreover, research by Silverman and Albano (1996) in their "Anxiety Disorders Interview Schedule for DSM-IV" found that separation anxiety and specific phobias were strongly correlated with school refusal behavior in children<sup>9</sup>. In the Indian context, there is a paucity of research addressing anxiety and school refusal among schoolchildren, despite growing evidence from other countries showing the detrimental effects on both emotional and academic outcomes for children with such issues<sup>9</sup>.

Several interventions have been proposed to address school refusal, particularly those involving cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), which aims to reduce anxiety through systematic desensitization, cognitive restructuring, and behavioral reinforcement<sup>6</sup>. Studies have shown that CBT is effective in treating childhood anxiety disorders and can significantly reduce school refusal behaviors. Additionally, parental training programs have been shown to enhance parents' ability to support their children through anxiety, thereby reducing school refusal tendencies. However, despite the promising effects of such therapies, the lack of culturally specific interventions in India remains a challenge<sup>10</sup>.

There is a gap in research addressing school refusal and anxiety in children from Indian socio-cultural contexts. Parenting practices, educational pressures, and societal expectations may play a different role in the development of anxiety disorders in children when compared to Western populations. Moreover, research on anxiety and school refusal in Indian children has often been limited, with a focus primarily on clinical settings rather than general population studies. Given these gaps, this study aims to bridge the gap by focusing on the relationship between school refusal and anxiety among children aged 12-15 years. The goal is to explore how emotional distress, particularly anxiety, manifests in this age group and influences school attendance.

## METHODOLOGY

This study was reviewed, discussed, and approved by the research ethical committee. The study was conducted at New Adarsh Senior Secondary School, Ghaziabad, with a focus on school-going children aged between 12 and 15 years. The study duration was for 2 months. As per the inclusion criteria, participants included both genders of children aged 12 to 15 years. Only school-going children and their parents who were willing to participate were included in the study. As per the exclusion criteria, children who were not enrolled in school, were under 12 years or over 15 years, or had any psychological or neurological conditions were excluded from participation.

### Outcome Measures:

**Screen for Child Anxiety-Related Disorders (SCARED):** The SCARED tool is used to assess anxiety disorders in children aged 8-18 years. Developed by Birmaher et al. in 1997, the tool consists of 41 items that assess various anxiety aspects, such as separation anxiety, social anxiety, generalized anxiety, panic, and school phobia. The scale is completed by both the child and the parent. Each item is rated on a 3-point scale: "0" (not true), "1" (somewhat true), and "2" (very true). Higher scores indicate more severe anxiety symptoms, with a set cut-off to identify children at risk for anxiety disorders<sup>24</sup>.

**School Refusal Assessment Scale (SRAS):** Developed by Christopher Kearney and Wendy Silverman, the SRAS evaluates school refusal symptoms and identifies reasons for avoiding school. The scale consists of 24 items assessing emotional, social, and educational aspects of school refusal. The reliability of the SRAS is measured by Cronbach alpha coefficients ranging from 0.41 to 0.905<sup>6</sup>.

## DATA COLLECTION

Data was collected from 384 children aged 12-15 years at New Adarsh Senior Secondary School, Ghaziabad. Informed consent was obtained from the parents or guardians of each child. The study measured school refusal behavior using the SRAS and anxiety levels using the SCARED tool. The SRAS includes questions related to emotions, social circumstances, and educational experiences, while the SCARED assesses the frequency of anxiety-related feelings and behaviors, using a Likert scale for responses.

## DATA ANALYSIS

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS. Spearman's rho correlation coefficient was used to assess the relationship between school refusal and anxiety among the children. Spearman's rho was chosen due to the ordinal nature of the SCARED and the potential non-linear relationship between the variables.

## RESULT

The demographic composition of the sample reveals a slight majority of females (202 children, 52.6%) compared to males (182 children, 47.4%), indicating a balanced distribution with a modest female predominance. The age distribution shows that 178 children (46%) fall within the 12–13 years age group, while 206 children (54%) belong to the 14–15 years group, reflecting a slightly higher representation of older children in the sample. These statistics are essential for understanding the demographic framework of the study.

Anxiety levels among the children were assessed using the SCARED scale, which categorized participants into four groups based on their scores. Of the 384 children, 162 (40.3%) had low or no anxiety (scores 0–24), 150 children (37.3%) exhibited moderate anxiety (scores 25–34), 65 children (16.2%) were categorized as having high anxiety (scores 35–44), and 7 children (1.7%) were in the very high anxiety group (scores above 45). This distribution highlights the varying levels of anxiety in the sample, with most children experiencing low to moderate anxiety.

The study further examined the relationship between school refusal behaviors—such as avoidance of school, escape from social situations, attention-seeking behavior, and pursuit of tangible rewards—and anxiety levels as measured by the SCARED scale. Strong positive correlations were observed across all dimensions, suggesting that higher levels of school refusal behaviors are associated with higher anxiety levels. The strongest correlation was between anxiety and avoidance behavior ( $r = 0.724$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), indicating that children with elevated anxiety are more likely to avoid school. Other significant correlations included anxiety with escape behavior ( $r = 0.586$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), attention-seeking behavior ( $r = 0.679$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and pursuit of tangible rewards ( $r = 0.614$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Based on these findings, the null hypothesis (no correlation between school refusal and anxiety) was rejected, and the alternative hypothesis (a correlation exists) was accepted.

Additionally, significant interrelations were identified among the dimensions of school refusal, with the strongest correlation observed between avoidance and attention-seeking behavior ( $r = 0.766$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). These results highlight the complex relationship between different aspects of school refusal and their strong association with anxiety, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions to address both school refusal and anxiety in children.

**Table 1: Spearman's Correlation between SCARED (anxiety) and SRAS (refusal).**

	<b>SCARED (Anxiety)</b>	<b>Avoidance</b>	<b>Escape</b>	<b>Attention Seeking</b>	<b>Pursuit of Tangible Reward</b>
<b>SCARED</b>	1.000	0.724**	0.586**	0.679**	0.614**
<b>Avoidance</b>	0.724**	1.000	0.765**	0.766**	0.708**
<b>Escape</b>	0.586**	0.765**	1.000	0.727**	0.663**
<b>Attention Seeking</b>	0.679**	0.766**	0.727**	1.000	0.704**
<b>Pursuit of Tangible Reward</b>	0.614**	0.708**	0.663**	0.704**	1.000

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).**

## DISCUSSION

The study explored the relationship between anxiety and school refusal behaviors, identifying significant positive correlations across all dimensions of school refusal, including avoidance of school, escape from social situations, attention-seeking behaviors, and the pursuit of tangible rewards. The strongest correlation was observed between anxiety and avoidance behavior ( $r = 0.724$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), highlighting the profound impact of anxiety on school attendance and engagement. This finding is consistent with prior research indicating that children with high levels of anxiety, particularly separation anxiety, are more likely to avoid school altogether.

Anxiety-driven avoidance can manifest as an overwhelming fear of attending school, often stemming from anticipatory distress about social interactions, academic challenges, or fears related to performance. This pattern aligns with the functional model of school refusal, which suggests that avoidance behaviors are a key mechanism through which children cope with anxiety-related distress (Kearney, 2008; Heyne et al., 2019).<sup>26</sup> Notable associations were also found between anxiety and other dimensions, such as escape behavior ( $r = 0.586$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), attention-seeking behavior ( $r = 0.679$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and pursuit of tangible rewards ( $r = 0.614$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). These results highlight the multifaceted nature of school refusal behavior, as children may engage in different strategies to manage their anxiety. For instance, children who struggle with social anxiety may seek to escape social situations or may refuse to go to school to avoid peer interactions (Masi & Candelieri, 2009).<sup>26</sup>

Attention-seeking behaviors and pursuit of tangible rewards may serve as coping mechanisms for children who feel overwhelmed by the demands of the school environment. This underscores the importance of recognizing the diverse ways in which anxiety can manifest in school refusal. Additionally, the interrelations among the dimensions of school

refusal were significant, with the strongest association identified between avoidance and attention-seeking behaviors ( $r = 0.766$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). This suggests a complex interplay where different types of school refusal behaviors may reinforce one another, further exacerbating the impact of anxiety on a child's academic and social development. The results of this study highlight the critical need for targeted interventions that address both anxiety and school refusal behaviors. Such interventions could include cognitive-behavioral strategies, family-focused approaches, and school-based support systems aimed at mitigating anxiety while promoting positive school engagement. By addressing the underlying factors contributing to these behaviors, it is possible to enhance the well-being and academic success of children within this vulnerable age group. The findings of this study are supported by several key theories and previous research.

Kearney's (2008) functional model of school refusal posits that school refusal behaviors are often driven by the desire to avoid negative emotions, such as anxiety. This model is corroborated by our study's findings, which demonstrate that anxiety is strongly associated with avoidance behaviors, suggesting that children use school refusal as a way to escape anxiety-provoking situations<sup>25</sup>.

Furthermore, studies by Heyne et al. (2019) and Last & Strauss (1990) have similarly found that anxiety is a major contributing factor to school refusal, particularly among children with separation anxiety, social anxiety, and generalized anxiety disorder. The connections between school refusal behaviors imply that they might form part of a wider behavioral pattern rather than being standalone issues. This perspective is in line with studies suggesting that interventions aimed at tackling one type of school refusal behavior, such as avoidance, could also influence other refusal behaviors, like attention-seeking or escape (McShane, 2015)<sup>26</sup>.

It is vital for practitioners and educators to adopt a comprehensive approach when dealing with school refusal, taking into account both the individual child's anxiety levels and the broader psychosocial factors involved. Recent studies have highlighted that school refusal is a complex issue influenced by various factors beyond anxiety. One of the significant findings from a 2023 study is that school refusal is not merely caused by anxiety but is often a result of negative reinforcement mechanisms, such as avoidance of distressing school situations (González et al., 2023)<sup>6</sup>. Anxiety, while contributing to the avoidance, is not the sole factor driving school refusal behaviors. Other factors such as family dynamics, peer relationships, and individual coping strategies also play a critical role<sup>6</sup>.

In line with this, the study also found strong correlations between different school refusal behaviors, suggesting that children who engage in one type of refusal behavior, such as avoidance, are more likely to engage in other behaviors, including escape, attention-seeking, and pursuit of tangible rewards. This reinforces the idea that school refusal behaviors are not isolated but are interconnected, with children using multiple strategies to avoid school or seek attention from parents and teachers (González et al., 2023)<sup>6</sup>. These behaviors may serve similar functions, such as reducing school-related stress or gaining reinforcement outside of the school environment.

Additionally, a study by Jabeen & Rauf (2023) emphasized the role of anxiety in school avoidance, particularly in children with learning disabilities. Their findings suggested that anxiety significantly correlates with school avoidance, indicating that children who experience high anxiety levels are more likely to avoid school altogether. However, this study also pointed out that the relationship between anxiety and school avoidance is multifaceted and influenced by other psychological and environmental factors<sup>7</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study highlights a significant and positive relationship between anxiety and school refusal behaviours, with anxiety strongly correlating with various dimensions of school refusal, particularly avoidance behaviours. The findings underscore the need for targeted interventions that address both anxiety and school refusal behaviours to support children's academic and social development.

## LIMITATIONS

- The correlational design of the study limits the ability to draw causal conclusions, making it challenging to determine whether anxiety leads to school refusal or vice versa.
- The study focused on children aged 12 to 15 years, which may not fully capture the scope of school refusal and anxiety across other developmental stages, particularly in younger children or adolescents beyond this age range.
- Excluding children with special needs or neurodevelopmental disorders may limit the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of children who might also experience school refusal and anxiety.

## FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

- Conduct a longitudinal study to track the developmental trajectory of school refusal and anxiety over time, helping to clarify causal relationships.
- Collect data from multiple sources, such as parents, teachers, and the children themselves, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of school refusal and anxiety.
- Examine school refusal and anxiety across different age groups to assess whether patterns differ between younger children, adolescents, and older teens.



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