

SCHOOL REFUSAL AND HOME EDUCATION

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Abstract

When a child refuses to go to school, the whole family is placed in a highly distressing situation. The response of school and mental health professionals in the UK is to return the child to school as soon as reasonably possible; home education is almost never suggested as a viable alternative. Nevertheless, a number of parents decide that home education will be in the best interests of their children. This mixed-method study reports on 20 such families who completed questionnaires, followed up by 5 in-depth interviews. Parents generally reported that symptoms associated with school refusal, both physical and psychological, lessened or disappeared altogether. Moreover, although they had turned to home education as a last resort, the majority decided to continue after seeing their children thrive academically and socially. It is concluded that parents of school refusers should always be fully informed about home education.

Children who refuse to go to school may resist getting ready for school and plead not to go both at home and on the way to school. They may experience night terrors, have tantrums, be unable to sleep or wet the bed. In more extreme cases children may be very depressed, self harm or even attempt suicide. It is obviously a very distressing situation for the whole family. The only recourse for parents and carers who see their children suffering in this way is to turn to school staff and other professionals for help. Any help that is provided almost always aims

SCHOOL REFUSAL AND HOME EDUCATION

at enabling the child to get back into school at the earliest opportunity. Home education is rarely considered an option, certainly not in the UK (Fortune-Wood, 2007). However, a number of parents, who might never otherwise have given a thought to home education, still opt to take their children out of school. For these in particular, the prospect of taking on full responsibility for their children's education in all its aspects must initially appear quite daunting.

Traditionally, school refusal has been associated with separation anxiety (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). While this might be true for very young children starting school, it is difficult to see how it might apply to older children who have been in school for some time. Archer, Filmer-Sankey and Fletcher-Campbell (2003) found the major cause to be family problems, especially poor parenting skills, suggesting that they included truancy in their definition of refusal. They certainly did not differentiate between truancy and elective home education in their study. While truants do refuse school, they are unlikely to fear going to school. Findings from other studies offer more cogent reasons such as bullying (Fortune-Wood, 2007; Knox, 1989, 1990) cultural expectations (Stroobant, 2006) problems with peers or fear of a teacher (Lauchlan, 2003) or transition between primary and secondary schools (Heyne & Rolling, 2004). Whatever the case, home education is not recommended by professionals; the standard form of treatment for anxiety is to gradually assist the sufferer to confront the situation in which it arose. Added to this is the prevailing belief that school is the best (even only!), place to obtain an effective social and academic education.

Children who cannot be persuaded to return to school may be offered various forms of treatment such as relaxation training, gradual reintroduction to school and/or cognitive behavioural therapy (Heyne & Rolling, 2004), family therapy (Place, Hulsmeier, Davis, &

Taylor, 2000) and medication (Kearney, 2007; Lauchlan, 2003). In more extreme cases attendance at a special unit, a residential program or as an inpatient at a clinic or hospital is arranged (Archer, Filmer-Sankey, & Fletcher-Campbell, 2003; Kearney & Albano, 2007; McShane, Walter, & Rey, 2004) or a referral to a legal system (Kearney, 2008). Home education for school refusers is rarely mentioned and when it is, is certainly not encouraged, partly because it can become harder to return to school the longer the child is absent (Heyne & Rolling, 2004; Wijetunge & Lakmini, 2011) and “parents will likely find it extremely difficult to reintegrate a child to a regular classroom setting if she has been taught at home for some period of time” Whatever the approach, treatment is only considered successful when a child is returned to school. The purpose of this paper is to see how far home education is effective in alleviating distressing symptoms associated with school refusal symptoms both in the short and long term.

METHODOLOGY

SCHOOL REFUSAL AND HOME EDUCATION

Carrying out research into home education is difficult for a number of reasons. First, no reliable database of home educators or of school refusers who are or have been home educated exists in the UK (Hopwood et al., 2007; Petrie, Windrass, & Thomas, 1999). Participants in this study were recruited through national home education newsletters. They were simply invited to complete an online questionnaire if their child had said “no” to school. The original intention was to use the questionnaire as a filter to identify prospective parents/carers to be interviewed but in the event the information provided in the questionnaire was very detailed, sufficient to warrant analysis in its own right. However, 5 follow up interviews were conducted with families. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of London Institute of Education Ethics Committee and British Psychological Society guidelines were followed.

Questionnaires were sent out to 35 families of whom 20 replied, relating to 24 children who had refused school. These were analysed according to the procedure set out by Gillham (2008) involving *subject descriptors* and *analysis grids*. Follow-up interviews were conducted firstly to further “illuminate” the data found from the questionnaires, and secondly to ‘dig’ deeper to find the process using a “mining approach” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p.48).

FINDINGS

The following table summarises at what stage of their school career the children refused school. As can be seen, most are in the primary years and the gender split is fairly even.

	Reception- Year 6	Years 7-11	Total
Age children began to refuse school	11m, 8f	3m, 2f	24

Table 1: School year groups when children refused school

Why did the children refuse school?

The reasons behind school refusal grouped together into five broad and interrelated categories: bullying by peers; the ways staff dealt with children; loss or lack of peer friendships; the learning environment; factors within the home. Just one parent (Q5, Int4) cited all 5 categories, the remaining 22 children each citing between 2 and 4 reasons. It would seem that problems with school in any area are likely to extend to others, further exacerbating dislike of school.

Here are some illustrative examples.

Bullying took place en route to school, in the school building and playground which was not satisfactorily resolved:

“He couldn’t use the toilets as one of the boys continually kicked the door open when he was in there. The headmaster told me he couldn’t go in there and do anything about this” (Q2)

SCHOOL REFUSAL AND HOME EDUCATION

Mother: “... *And you [age11] got taped up on the bus, didn't you by the older boys [aged 15]*

Son: *Yeah, and the driver didn't do a thing, which is kind of irresponsible, isn't it? ... Taped my mouth and then taped my hands behind my back and my feet and that”* (Int3:225-228).

“She was scared of being attacked following her brother being shot ... the boy who shot my son and his family and friends kept on attacking us in the street when we were out” (Q10)

She was unhappy with the way the way bullies were allowed to get away with hurting people without getting into trouble. The abused were physically forced to 'shake hands' with their abusers as a source of 'good will' rather than the head teacher dealing with the bullies. (Q10)

Some children feared their teachers:

“[Aged] 7, she was frightened by a strict teacher saying she didn't want to see any mistakes; my daughter couldn't see how she could learn without making mistakes, and was afraid to try” (Q17)

Mother: *“She [class teacher] had the attitude and the personality and the characteristics that would have suited somebody dealing with older children rather than 5 and 6 year olds ... everybody sits very quiet, children would be seen and not heard*

Son: *A bit inconvenient when you're dealing with 5 year olds”* (Int4:209, 215-216)

or were misunderstood by them:

“... his teacher pulled me aside and spoke to me about the fact that [my son] was kissing his friend and this wasn't acceptable behaviour. His friend was bigger and much stronger and liked to wrestle unlike [my son]. When I asked him why he had kissed his friend he replied 'It is the only way to get him off me'.” (Q2)

Children who simply did not conform to school expectations

“... not making friends in his class (he didn't fit in by not playing football; he's more of a train person)” (Q21)

“It was evident that our daughter was not 'conforming' to the norm and found it difficult in class” (Q20)

Daughter: *“I happened to be friends with all the children older than me [and who had moved up], so I felt kind of lonely” (Int5:128)*

“His particular way of being means he likes to spend hours dreaming and has lots and lots of creative ideas and projects that arise from this. The secondary school timetable left him no time at all to be himself and I think he was very confined by this.” (Q13)

“... he found the parts of the school day, changes of routine, when he had to get dressed and undressed and changed for P.E., all of those quite difficult areas for him to take on board, that because [of] your timetable ... that it can't be done at your leisure ... he had problems adjusting from one lesson to the next ... just making that change; oh, I've got to finish this now and move on to the next one ...” (Int4:228)

Special educational needs were not met:

SCHOOL REFUSAL AND HOME EDUCATION

“I spoke with our son’s teacher about any help he was likely to receive if he stayed in school and was told that ‘there was already 5 children who need help in the class and I’m allowed to put forward 4 to get help” (Q21)

Symptoms associated with school refusal

The behaviour of the children in this study, prior to being withdrawn from school, generally conformed to that found in other studies of school refusal: clinging, somatic pains, distress, anxiety, bed wetting, night terrors, resistance, depression, a sense of withdrawal, suicidal threat and two suicide attempts.

“... she became withdrawn and attempted suicide .” (Q19)

“Major temper tantrums, said she would kill, cut herself and generally always feeling poorly. Bedwetting also on a very regular basis.” (Q14)

Mother: *“... [he said] I would like to knife myself. I’m going to go and get a knife and stick it in my stomach” and I mean this was an eight-year-old*

Grandmother: *And younger than that you had the faeces smearing*

Mother: *... quite often I would find poo smeared in his room and hiding it. He got very, he even got fearful of going to toilets” (Int4: 370-372)*

“ ... was crying as soon as she woke, having night terrors, refusing to get ready for school and once at school cried lots and when we arrived at school would get out of her car seat and sit in a ball on the floor of the car” (Q11)

Refusal could express itself in other ways.

“... as time went on he went more into himself and the body language stopped being outward and manly, it became more ‘wee boy’” (Int1:25)

“Physically he (subconsciously) suppressed going to the toilet to the extent that he could go for a week without moving his bowels. Obviously when he did eventually go at home it was really painful, usually included some bleeding and took ages.”
(Q2)

“I was shocked to find that he was copying other children’s behaviour and sitting – sometimes for whole lessons, under the table. Snapping pencils so he could not write...He sat his SAT mocks and the ripped them up, refusing to re-sit them” (Q9)

“I found out many months after the event that he had actually run away from school (at the age of about 8/9 years) and the Head Teacher had to search the streets for him” (Q9)

“[He] told me, in first year, that he knew he just had to get an education - but it did not need to be in school. I knew he was unhappy as he was very open and spoke about it.” (Q12)

HOME EDUCATION

SCHOOL REFUSAL AND HOME EDUCATION

The main focus of our research which will now be addressed is how far the decision to home educate these children turned out to be successful or otherwise, first with regard to overcoming the symptoms associated with refusal and second, how far parents were satisfied with the educational progress of their children.

Recovery

For all the children home education proved to improve wellbeing, whether in the short or longer term.

“It took one night and the bed wetting completely stopped” (Q14)

“He stopped the Prozac two weeks after coming out ... if it was something you could stop taking immediately then he would have been off it that first day” (Int4:306)

“Physically he (subconsciously) suppressed going to the toilet to the extent that he could go for a week without moving his bowels. Obviously when he did eventually go at home it was really painful, usually included some bleeding and took ages. Once he was removed from school, this stopped within a week or so.” (Q2)

“She was not ready, physically or emotionally, to cope with school, and once she was at home again she relaxed into her familiar life very quickly” (Q17)

“the sense of relaxation he had about him all came back. It took a while, it definitely took a while” (Int1:59)

“Yes, for us it has been a success. Our son is a lot happier, his asthma is improved and his weight stabilised. He is more creative and expressive. His attention span has improved and although he still has problems with maths and likes to take his time (he hates to be rushed) he is improving every day.” (Q9)

Daughter: *“I didn’t get them [headaches] every day but they didn’t completely go ... if I’d had a really stressful week or something, they’d come back but not as much as they used to” (Int2:77)*

Some parents mentioned a period, almost a ‘time out’, before improvement. While mental health professionals might suggest a short time out, they would still want to return the child to school as soon as possible.

“it has not been an easy ride - she was a monster for the first year and mainly that was due to the confidence she had lost at school ... There have been prejudices from friends and family that held her back – not now though. She sticks up for her convictions now!” (Q14)

“So now it is a year on and things are settling down, he does some work and is much happier in himself” (Q22)

“It took him at least a year to deschool; he would not be separated from me and would not pick up a pen or do anything ‘schooly’ at all. I let him be and he recovered in his own time. After that his confidence blossomed ...” (Q16)

“[home education] takes the pressure off, and it gives them time ... I know some of the families that home-ed, the parents get anxious because they feel like they should be doing, and actually the child is still unwinding, and is maybe, you know, half a year, a year away from doing anything. They’re just sort of trying to find themselves again” (Int2:390)

SCHOOL REFUSAL AND HOME EDUCATION

Following sufficient time to allow for recovery, 8 children returned to school or college and a further 5 felt able to, but chose to remain home educated. In some cases, home education in the short term was sufficient for recovery and a return to school.

“I think the recovery time that [he] had was right for him, if it hadn’t been he wouldn’t have been able to stay with college” (Int1:91)

Researcher: “did it make a difference having him home educated first, before he went to [Special School], rather than going straight from the old school to [the Special School]?”

Mother: *Yeah, he wouldn’t have gone straight to it*

Researcher: Why not?

Grandmother: *He was too damaged at that point ... He wouldn’t have gone straight to school: any_school”.* (Int4:589-594)

Other children had improved but were still suffering from the effects of their school experience.

“Yes it was the perfect solution, although he is still struggling and coming to terms with his bad experiences at school. His depression is nearly gone and he is generally a happy boy. However, his self esteem is still quite battered and he still believes that he is unable to read, write or do any kind of maths.” (Q6)

“Home education has proved to be a lifeline, the way out of an unbearable situation, a safety net. My son is still shy and lacking in confidence socially but this may have been worse with a further battering from being in the school system. He has developed very well in other ways as a result of leaving school.” (Q18)

Practising home education

A common remark made by home educating parents when they start out, especially if they have taken their children out of school is “Oh no, it’s Monday morning and what am I going to do?” Typically, they start out doing school at home with a timetable, planning lessons, setting work and so on. Nearly all parents soon realise that education at home can be much more flexible. Also, because it is individualised, it also tends to be much more intense. Although there is a great variety of approaches used by parents, from quite formal to very informal, the majority have a structured couple of hours in the morning with the rest of the day free (Thomas, 1998).

Most parents in this study were no different. They also came to believe that home education would be in the best long term interests of their children.

“I didn’t want to be the one teaching him because of not coming from that background I didn’t feel capable ... we found tutors for the subjects he wanted to follow ... as each year went by I was able to come further and further away and leave him to get on with [academic work]” (Int1:53)

Daughter: *“I [suggested a] timetable when I was asking mum to take me out of school and I actually did quite like the idea of it – you know, that would be good but the reality; it didn’t work so I never did it, I don’t think. I think it just kind of slipped my mind and I just thought, “I don’t want to, I don’t want to have a timetable to work by”.* (Int2:73)

SCHOOL REFUSAL AND HOME EDUCATION

It also allowed more time for self-development as we could cover the formal literacy and numeracy in an hour leaving the rest of the day for interest driven education” (Q15)

“They have both grown in confidence and they are doing very well academically, they are both over a year ahead and we only do about 9 or 10 hours of school per week. In areas that are not part of the National Curriculum they are far more inquisitive than a lot of children that I know and are far more advanced, my 6 year old for example can explain tectonic plates very well.” (Q11)

“His enthusiasm for learning came roaring back ... One to one has worked beautifully for him. He can learn what he wants to learn when he wants to learn it” (Int4:306)

“[He] was able to learn at his own pace and using his own methods to understand with one-to-one teaching in a safe environment. Was no longer bullied and rejected for being different.” (Q6)

“She has made a huge jump in her education, especially in her reading as she is not held back any more at school.” (Q7)

“For a long time he didn’t really bother doing any education much, but just getting used to sort of normal life, really, where it’s not a great battle” (Int4:394)

“He also has Chronic Fatigue Syndrome and yet has managed to get 5 equivalent GCSEs. He was assessed again 18 months ago and placed on the 99.7 percentile” (Q23)

“[He] likes to take his time (he hates to be rushed) he is improving every day. He likes to be able to study what he likes, for as long as he likes to the depth that he

wishes to. When we were first assessed by the LEA liaison in [town] she said after reading my son's last report card she thought she had the wrong child! His reading had gone from 'below his peers' to that 'of an older teenager' within 6 months" (Q9)

"24 hours a day he could just be himself and explore everything he was interested in. He's gone much quicker in the subjects he was really passionate about. Maths, Music, IT and computers and since he's been at music college every Saturday since he was 8 years old and he can do all the practice he wants during the day without having to fit it in when he was tired after a full day at school as before. This means he's just much more relaxed. He's gone up to degree level, at sixteen Maths Computing and Music. He reads a lot and studies everything he's interested in. He keeps himself informed about politics and what's going on in the world. We are always discussing everything ... He's developed in his own way, really" (Q13)

"Our son has written an article in the '[national specialised magazine] and won trophies for his work with the [county] Engineering Society. These have done more for his confidence than any 'help' the school could ever provide ... He was marked as 'gifted and talented' whilst at school for the flair he showed in this area, but nothing ever happened!" (Q21)

A striking feature of home education is that children learn a great deal informally, through everyday experiences and by following their own interests (Thomas, 1998; Thomas & Pattison, 2008). Parents became aware of spontaneous conversation, and the learning that might accrue from it.

I teach according to the National Curriculum for maths, English, science and history. We discuss any subject that arises out of these areas and can spend hours

SCHOOL REFUSAL AND HOME EDUCATION

discussing topics such as slavery as a result of the election of Obama in the USA, a situation which would not arise in school” (Q11)

“We are always discussing everything as we're quite passionate about ethical things and children's rights and what's abusive about school etc so he's able to be very strong about home education” (Q13)

...as well as picking up knowledge from all over the place:

“I have no reservations whatsoever about home-ed'ing the children. They are so very much happier in themselves; their relationship has improved; they have time – not just to learn but to play; they have exercise each day. They are more confident – e.g. going into shops and buying bits and pieces. Their concentration span has increased naturally. They have remembered most, if not all, of the information and learning in the projects we have undertaken. They have been able to learn through real, hands-on experience ... I wish I had offered this to the children years ago” (Q3)

“he would go up to anyone doing anything interesting and interrogate them, and he was hungry for information ... was [only] behind in French by the time he chose to go back to school” (Q16)

“Our daughter taught herself to read and gained confidence through all the various activities she takes part in (Guides, Drama, Canal Barge - being crew, Youth Group, working with animals on a farm and rescue centre).” (Q20)

and developing independence

“An educational psychologist assessment reported that he would need someone to support him full-time in a school setting, once home he showed tremendous

motivation and rarely needed support. He is currently taking his 'official' exams for the European Computer Driving Licence qualification" (Q2)

"Our daughter flourishes as well, and has already started to direct her learning towards the job she would like to do" (Q10)

"At 7 he decided to learn to read and a year later he had a reading age of 11" (Q23)

"She's found what she wants to do, she's really motivated to do it, she researched all her GCSEs, I didn't do anything to do with it, she told us how much they cost, "Mum and Dad can you please can you, you know put the money in on the internet?" And she's done it all herself" (Int2:413)

Socialisation

The most common criticism of home education concerns the lack of opportunity to mix with other children. Parents were not immune from this.

"Hopefully, so far she is very positive about home ed but it is early days. We are worried about her becoming socially isolated" (Q19)

"The only thing I worry about is loneliness. My son is an only child and has made very good friends with his computer. You have to look at the world differently. Being social is a more flexible, all ages thing, rather than lots of teenagers hanging round together" (Q13)

SCHOOL REFUSAL AND HOME EDUCATION

One child did return to school because he was 'lonely' (Q16). Otherwise the parents were satisfied with the provisions they made for social interaction.

"They have made great friends which my daughter had not done in 4 years of school" (Q11)

Daughter: "I have more friends now that I am home educated than when I was at school ... I've just met friends through good friends" (Int2:30-32)

Daughter: "I do have a lot of friends. It's not the same as being in a school.... You can choose whoever you want, and you're not divided into age ... you can be friends with a five-year-old if you want to. And you can do lessons with them, you don't have to do lessons with someone the same age as you 'cos I do" (Int5:522)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings challenge many assumptions in the literature on school refusal: that children suffer from separation anxiety, or have an irrational school phobia, especially that home education itself is inadvisable. Such beliefs are certainly not borne out in this study. Parents were simply trying to deal with the stress their children experienced, often going to great lengths to sort out things at school. When this did not seem to work, they looked into home education.

Being home educated meant that there was no pressure on children to return to school.

Twelve of the children reached a stage of feeling able to return to school with eight actually doing so which is at odds with the reasoning that the longer a child is absent, the harder it is

to return (Heyne & Rolling, 2004; Wijetunge & Lakmini, 2011). Parents talked about home education offering their children the opportunity for ‘time out’ which parents saw as imperative for recovery, using words such as ‘deschool’ and ‘unwinding’. Children were allowed to learn at their own pace and had greater freedom than in the classroom to choose what and when to learn. Parents talked of their children becoming more ‘enthusiastic’ and growing in confidence. Special needs were met through the one-to-one teaching and the time available for children to pursue their own interests. Parents describe their children as being happier, more relaxed and feeling more ‘safe’ being home educated, and as a consequence their learning soared. Given these very positive aspects of home education, it would be very interesting to carry out further research into why some children choose to return to school.

Parents generally thought that their decision to home educate was justified. Symptoms associated with school refusal mostly disappeared or were reduced considerably which confirms Knox (1989) who proposed that home education “virtually eliminates any mental illness” (p. 150) and Fortune-Wood (2007) who found that symptoms “either disappear completely with no after effects or decline considerably” (p. 137).

Two notes of caution are required. Parents were self-selected and only those who were confident they had taken the right decision are likely to have responded. It is most likely that those whose attempt at home education had failed would not have been subscribers to home education newsletters and so they would not have known about the research. A second factor is that our study is based almost wholly on parental perceptions and experiences. The professional perceptions might have been quite different.

SCHOOL REFUSAL AND HOME EDUCATION

Moving forward, the children in this study may well be the tip of the iceberg with regard to school refusal. There are probably other children in school who suffer quietly but are then scarred for life. The ones in this study have taken the very radical yet rational step of refusing to go to school by whatever means it takes. More school based research into factors that may cause the kind of stress associated with school refusal needs to be undertaken. School and mental health professionals should be required to suggest home education as an alternative to returning to school; they will also need to be much better informed about home education.

Dr. Alan Thomas is a developmental psychologist and Visiting Fellow at the University of London Institute of Education. He has worked at universities and research institutes in the UK, Australia, Holland and Spain and written numerous articles and two research monographs on informal home education, the most recent with Harriet Pattison: *How Children Learn at Home* (Continuum), currently being translated into French and German. We also have an article in press: *Informal home education: philosophical aspirations put into practice* in the journal: *Studies in Philosophy and Education*. We are now researching how home educated children learn to read at home, especially those who learn without being taught. He is fascinated by informal learning or unschooling because it is home educators who are finding out so much about the nature of human learning, not mainstream academics nearly all of whom assume education can only consist of planned curricula, direct teaching and sequential learning.

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Allison qualified as a teacher at Durham University (1980), and worked in schools and as a Further Education College lecturer before becoming a full-time mother. All three of her children have both attended school and been home educated using the

unschooled/autonomous approach. Two have since attended university and two had refused school. More recently Allison has served as a trustee on the National Association for Gifted Children UK charity, obtained an MA in Education Psychology at London University and is now at Cambridge University undertaking a masters with a view to progressing to doctoral studies. Allison's area of interest lies in researching home education as a viable option for children who do not want, or feel they cannot, go to school.

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