

The predictors of school refusal: Depression, anxiety, cognitive distortion and attachment

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The predictors of school refusal: Depression, anxiety, cognitive distortion and attachment¹

Abstract

School refusal is the main problem that observed in almost all levels of education in Turkey. This problem is characterized by difficulties coming to school, in remaining at school for an entire day or not to feel well at school. School refusal is commonly associated with cognitive evaluations and emotional problems, and it may also be a source for other various problems. The purpose of this study was to investigate the predictor power of depression, negative thoughts and attachment styles on school refusal in Turkish student sample. Moreover, the school refusal behavior was also investigated with related to some demographical variables such as gender, perceived socio-economic level, and parents' education level. The study group consisted of 340 secondary school students studying in Istanbul. School Refusal Assessment Scale-R, The Revised Child Anxiety and Depression Scale-Short Version, The Experiences in Close Relationships Middle Childhood, and Three Dimensions of Cognitive Scale were used as measurements. Results indicated that school refusal was predicted by anxiety, depression and negative thoughts but was not predicted by attachment styles such as avoidance and anxiety attachment. The results were presented and discussed with the light of the literature.

Keywords: school refusal; anxiety; depression; cognitive distortion; attachment.

1. Introduction

School refusal is a problem that many families, teachers and schools are familiar with. The term is used together with some concepts such as absenteeism, truancy, and school phobia. Absenteeism refers to "excusable or inexcusable absences from school" (Kearney, 2004). It means that it is a persistent or regular pattern of not attending school. It usually occurs in the knowledge and consent of a parent. Absent students are usually at home when they need to be at school. Truancy, on the other hand, generally refers to unexcused, illegal, surreptitious absences. It can be said that it is a form of non-anxiety-based absenteeism. Unlike absenteeism, truancy has a tendency to hide from their parents or to do so against the wishes of their parents. School phobia, generally refers a kind of absenteeism originated from fear (Kearney, 2008b). This term is often used not for youths but for early childhood (Hanna, Fischer, & Fluent, 2006). The confusion in concepts stems from the difficulty of identifying and monitoring the etiology of school refusal behavior.

School refusal is an inclusive term includes referring attending to school and difficulties in school related activities (Kearney, 2008). This term is used for all students refusing come to school or having difficulty remaining in school (Kearney and Bensaheb, 2006; Kearney &

¹ Submitted in IX. European Conference on Social and Behavioral Sciences Congress, Paris, 3-6 February 2016
Publication date:03.02.2016.

Tekin, I., Erden, S., & Sirin Ayva, A. B. (2017). The Predictors of School Refusal: Depression, Anxiety, Cognitive Distortion and Attachment. *Journal of Human Sciences*, 14(4), NNN-NNN. doi:10.14687/jhs.v14i4.NNNN

Silverman, 1999) or feel difficulty in attending school activities (Kearney & Silverman, 1999). School refusal behaviour excludes school withdrawal or parent-motivated absenteeism (Kearney, 2008a). Researchers suggest four different functions for the school refuse behaviour. These functions are avoidance of school related distress, aversive social and appraising environments at school, seeking to gain care from the significant others, and to get concrete rewards outdoor of the school (Kearney, 2008).

School refusal can be observed all levels of the education and derived from various reasons. Generally, younger students (5-11 years) refuse school for the purpose of drawing attention, avoid from general negative effects and they have experience more separation anxiety (Roblek, 1997). Moreover, these students could not manage remaining school whole day, even if they could remain, they feel bad (Kearney, 2007). For elder students (12-17 years), school refusal behaviour is displayed to gain solid tangible rewards out of the school or avoid assessment environment (Kearney, 2007; Rubenstein & Hastings, 1980). Adolescents having school refusal behaviour change their school frequently, feel school related fear and are displayed behavioural problems (Hendron, 2006; Kearney, 2001; Steven, 2001).

School refuse can be observed frequently when students begin a new class or school (1st grade of junior, senior or high school) than other grades and among young adolescents (Kearney & Bates, 2005). In China, while it is found that 12, 15 and 18 years are peak ages of the school refuse (Wu, Liu, Huang, Mo, Lin 2013) in Turkey, age mean of the students applying psychiatry service with school refusal compliant found $9,1(\pm 3,0)$. According to King and Bernstein (2001), peak age of the students with school refusal is 6-7 and 10-12. These data show that school refusal behavior would variation among different countries and cultures.

School refusal behaviour refers to illegitimate, child-motivated absenteeism (Beidas, Crawley, Mychailyszyn, Comer & Kendall 2010; Kearney and Bensaheb, 2006), in other words it refers to absenteeism that don't derive from health problems or parents (Kearney, 2008; Wimmer, 2008). In a psychodynamic perspective, school refusal would be an emotional problem that related to a dependent relationship especially with mother (Christogiorgos & Giannakopoulos, 2014). In the view of the results, which handled school refusal and parents together, it can be thought that there may be a relationship between school refusal and attachment styles.

Those who have a form of insecure attachment are those who are uncomfortable with getting closer to others, have troubles in completely trusting them, are less adaptable to social life, cannot control their feelings too much, and are more vulnerable to stress (Kesebir, Kavzoğlu, & Üstündağ, 2011). According to Moss and St-Laurent (2001) children with secure attachment perform better than their insecure peers on lots of areas such as communication, cognitive engagement, and mastery motivation. Therefore, it is thought that insecure attachment style may lead to school refusal. Additionally, when working with school refusal, the most used techniques are cognitive-behavioral techniques (Kearney, 2008b), such as managing physical indications of anxiety, altering school related irrational thoughts, and reintegrating into a specific school setting (Heyne et al., 2001). Thus, school refusal is thought to be predicted by negative thoughts.

School refuse may cause short and long term adverse outcomes (Kearney, 2001). Possible short-term problems according to the family would be deterioration of the family routine, accordingly intense family conflict, increase of the economic expenses, potentially less consultation to the child or misbehaviour. On the other hand, the effects of school refuse may get involved in crime, less academic performance, alienation from peers and school, discipline problems for the children. Furthermore, long term problems related the school refuse would be school dropout, tendency to juvenile delinquency, less psychological function, anxiety,

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depression, alcohol use problems, criminal behaviours, psychological problems requiring psychiatric support, vocational problems for children and marriage problems for families (Barth, 1984; Iwata, Hazama, Nakagome, 2012; Kearney and Bensaheb, 2006; Kearney & Hugelshofer, 2000; Kearney, 2001; Last & Strauss, 1990; Sewell, 2008; Wimmer, 2008).

Clinically, school refusal behaviour is evaluated as a symptom of conduct disorder and kind of anxiety such as separation anxiety, general anxiety, excessive anxiety. Beside to these, depression and worry could be observed in school refusal children (Bernstein, 1991; Fremont, 2004; Henggeler, 2006; Haight, Kearney, Hendron & Schafer, 2011; Last & Strauss, 1990). Moreover, personal failure and negative automatic thoughts related aversion and negative overgeneralizing cognitive distortion predict school refusal behaviour (Maric et al., 2012). According to a study carried out by Bahalı, Tahiroğlu, Avcı and Seydaoğlu (2011), education level of the parents of the students suffering from school refusal are lower than the other groups. These students had higher anxiety and depression scores.

To analyze the predictive power of attachment, anxiety, depression and negative thoughts of the students for school refusal behavior is the aim of this research. In addition to the aim, the school refusal behaviour is investigated with related to some demographical variables such as gender, perceived economic level, and parents' education level.

2. Method and materials

2.1. Study Design

This study based on correlational study design. With this design, it is aimed to define a previous or current event, person or object in its own conditions (Karasar, 2006).

2.2. Sample

The sample of this research consisted of 340 students attending 4 secondary schools in Istanbul. Data gathered from this sample from 5th to 8th grade students in fall term, 2015. 83 of them are 5th (24,4) grade, 69 are 6th (20,3%) grade, 129 are 7th grade 74 (37,9%) and 59 are 8th (17,4%) grade. In terms of gender distribution, 195 of sample are female (57,4%) and 145 are male (42,6%). The education levels of participants' mothers were following: 126 (37,1%) of them graduated from primary, 69 (20,3%) from secondary, 89 (26,2%) from high school and 56 (16,5%) from university. According to fathers' education, 81 (23,8%) were graduated from primary, 72 (21,2%) from secondary, 108 (31,8%) from high school and 79 (23,2%) from university. In terms of perceived socio-economic status, 110 (32,4%) of them reported that they are in low socio-economic level, 186 (54,7%) are in middle and 44 (12,9 %) are in high socio-economic level.

2.3. Instruments

School Refusal Assessment Scale-R, The Revised Child Anxiety and Depression Scale-Short Version, and Three Dimensions of Cognitive Scale were used as instruments. Moreover, Personal Information Form was also used to gain demographic information.

2.3.1. School Refusal Assessment Scale - R

The inventory was developed by Kearney and Silverman (1993) to assess school refusal behaviour. After that this scale was revised by Haight, Kearney, Hendron and Schafer (2011) and adapted into Turkish by Seğer (2014). It consists of 19 items with a 7-point scale from "never" to "always. This scale has four subscales called avoidance of school related distress, aversive social and evaluative environments at school, seeking to gain attention from the significant others, and to gain tangible rewards outside of the school. All of them explaining 52,69 % of total variance. Cronbach alpha coefficient was .86 for total scale and .82, .84, .84, .81 for factors respectively.

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Spearman split half and test-retest reliability coefficients were found to be .85 (.82, .84, .84 and .81 for factors) and .86 (.87, .88, .88 and .85) respectively (Seçer, 2014).

2.3.2. The Revised Child Anxiety and Depression Scale-Short Version

The scale was developed by Spence (1997) and revised by Chorpita, Yim, Moffitt, Umemoto, and Francis (2000) and shortened by Ebesutani, Reise, Chorpita, Ale, Regan Young and Higa-McMillan (2012). In the shortened version, there are 25-item of the scale. 15-item of them measure anxiety and the rest 10-item measure depression. Turkish adaptation was made by Seçer and Şimşek (2015). Findings of confirmatory factor analysis indicated that RMSEA: .071, RMR: .065, SRMR: .070, NFI: .97, CFI: .98. Factor loadings ranged between .32 and .75. Cronbach alpha coefficient, Spearman split half reliability and test-retest reliability coefficients were found to be .89, .85 and .91, respectively (Seçer and Şimşek, 2015).

2.3.3. The Experiences in Close Relationships-R - Middle Childhood

This measurement tool was developed by Fraley, Waller, and Brennan (2000) in order to evaluate adults' attachment and adopted into Turkish by Selçü Günaydın, Sümer and Uysal (2005). This scale was reviewed to make the scale to measure overall attachment dynamics in middle childhood by Brenning, Soenens, Braet, and Bosmans (2011). This version of scale was adopted into Turkish by Kırmır, Akça & Sümer (2014). The Scale consists of 36 item, 18 items both two subscale; attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. Participants ranks the scale on a 7-point rating scale. According to results of principal components factor analysis items explain 36.38 of total variance (attachment anxiety explains 18.66% and attachment avoidance explains 17.72). Cronbach alpha coefficient is .90 for the avoidance subscale and .78 for the anxiety subscale. The correlation between attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance was significant, positively ($r = .49, p < .01$) (Kırmır, Akça & Sümer, 2014).

2.3.4. Three Dimensions of Cognitive Scale

This scale was developed by Bilgin (2004) to measure cognitive trio to self, experience and future. Consisting of 30 items scale has three factors on a 5-point rating scale. The results of reliability and validity analyses showed that three factors explain 53.98% of total variance. The reliability analysis results were found to be as following; internal consistency coefficient was .93; item-total correlation coefficients were .02 to .71; test-retest coefficient was .58; split half coefficient was .80.

4. Results

Before the main analyses, standard deviation and means analysis were done as a preliminary analysis. The results can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Standard deviations and means of the study variables

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
School refusal	340	19,00	82,00	44,08	10,40
Attachment avoidance	340	18,00	126,00	43,98	20,49
Attachment anxiety	340	18,00	104,00	38,36	13,58
Anxiety	340	15,00	56,00	24,79	6,67

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Depression	340	10,00	40,00	16,23	4,74
Negative Thoughts	340	30,00	134,00	43,96	16,11

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After the preliminary analysis, correlations of the study variables examined. The findings are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Correlations among study variables

Groups	Attachment avoidance	Attachment anxiety	Anxiety	Depression	Negative thoughts
School refusal	,13*	,32**	,45**	,43**	,31**
Attachment avoidance		,39**	,21**	,32*	,32*
Attachment anxiety			,46**	,42**	,39**
Anxiety				,71**	,36**
Depression					,40**

*p<.05, **p<.01

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According to the results of Pearson Moment correlation, school refusal was significantly correlated with attachment avoidance ($r=.13$, $p<.05$), attachment anxiety ($r=.32$, $p<.01$), anxiety ($r=.45$, $p<.01$), depression ($r=.43$, $p<.01$), and negative thoughts ($r=.31$, $p<.01$). In terms of attachment, avoidance style was correlated with anxiety ($r=.21$, $p<.01$), depression ($r=.32$, $p<.01$), and negative thoughts ($r=.32$, $p<.01$); anxiety attachment style was also correlated with anxiety ($r=.47$, $p<.01$), depression ($r=.42$, $p<.01$), and negative thoughts ($r=.39$, $p<.01$). Moreover, a positive and significant relationship was found between anxiety and depression ($r=.71$), and negative thoughts ($r=.16$). Finally, depression and negative thoughts were also correlated positively.

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Multiple regression analysis was applied to define the predictive power of these variables on school refusal. Results were given in Table 3.

Table 3. Regression analysis predicting school refusal using measures of attachment, anxiety and depression and negative thoughts

Variables	B	SE _B	B	t	p	R	R ²	F
Constant	23,00	2,14		10,74	.000			
Attachment avoidance	-,03	,03	-,05	-,99	.32	.50	.25	22.09***
Attachment anxiety	,09	,05	,11	1,83	.07			

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Anxiety	,38	,11	,24	3,38**	.00
Depression	,40	,16	,18	2,53*	.01
Negative thoughts	,09	,04	,12	2,28*	.02

As the results revealed that the predictive role of the independent variables was proven to be statistically significant ($F= 22,093$, $p<.001$). Attachment avoidance, attachment anxiety, anxiety and depression and negative thoughts predicted school refusal ($R= 0.499$, $R^2=0.249$, $p<.01$). All these variables explain approximately 25% of total variance. β scores indicate that anxiety ($\beta =.239$, $p<.01$) had the strongest effect on school refusal. The second predictor that contributed to model was depression ($\beta =.179$, $p<.05$). Finally, negative thoughts also predicted school refusal ($\beta =.179$, $p<.05$). In other respects, school refusal was not predicted by attachment styles (avoidance and anxiety attachment $\beta =-.53$, $p>.05$ and $\beta =.106$, $p>.05$ respectively).

The effect of gender, perceived socio-economic level, and education level of parents on school refusal were also investigated and results are presented in the following tables.

Table 4. The result of t-Test for School Refusal in terms of gender

Score	Groups	N	μ	SD	SE μ	t Test		
						t	df	p
School Refusal	Female	195	44,16	10,47	,75	,17	34	,86
	Male	145	43,96	10,35	,86			

The results of independent sample group t-test indicated that, it was gained no significant differences between female and male on school refusal.

Table 5. The result of ANOVA for School Refusal in terms of Percieved Socio-Economic Level

Group	N	μ	SD	Source of Variance	Sum of Square	df	Mean Square	F	p
Low	110	46,07	11,14	Between Groups	780,59	2	390,29	3,67	0,27
Middle	186	43,50	10,32						
High	44	41,54	7,90	Total	36697,17	339			

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Total 340 44,08 10,40

ANOVA findings represented that students' school refusal scores statistically vary according to their perceived socio-economic status ($F=3.62$, $p<.05$). According to Scheffe post hoc test, this difference has taken place between low and high socio-economic level is in favor of students having low socio-economic status.

Table 6. The result of ANOVA for School Refusal in terms of Parent's Education Level

Group	N	μ	SD	Source of Variance	Sum of Square	Df	Mean Square	F	P
Mother's Education Level									
Primary Sch.	126	43,59	10,44	Between Groups	81,99	3	27,33		
Secondary Sch.	69	43,98	11,25	Within Groups	36615,17	336	108,97	,25	,86
High Sch.	89	44,66	10,38	Total					
University	56	44,53	9,44						
Father's Education Level									
Primary Sch.	81	45,64	10,99	Between Groups	289,86	3	96,62		
Secondary Sch.	72	43,03	10,22	Within Groups	36407,31	336	108,36	,90	,45
High Sch.	108	43,82	10,31	Total	36697,17	339			
University	79	43,79	10,11						

As seen in Table 6, mothers' and fathers' level of education has not occurred significant differences in school refusal scores ($F=,25$, $p>.05$, $F= ,90$, $p>.05$, respectively).

5 Discussion and Conclusion

The main aim of this study is to define the predictive power of attachment styles, anxiety, depression, and negative thoughts on school refusal. It was gained that attachment styles, anxiety, depression, and negative thoughts were correlated to school refusal. Based on the correlations, the predictivity of the variables on school refusal were examined. The findings indicated that anxiety, depression, and negative thoughts are predictors for school refusal.

It is known that there are many kinds of anxiety such as separation anxiety, social anxiety, and generalized anxiety. All of which may function as a significant variable in the emergence of school refusal behaviour. Separation anxiety as a form of anxiety is assumed as an important factor creating school refusal. The studies (Bagnell, 2011; Bahalı, Yolga, Tahiroğlu, & Avcı, 2009; Christogiorgos & Giannakopoulos, 2014; Özcan, Kılıç, Aysev, 2006) indicated that children experiencing school refusal were also suffered from separation anxiety and anxiety disorders.

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When separation anxiety is fundamental to school refusal then it is necessary to focus on the mother-child relationship. Separation anxiety emerge in which a person is separated from the mother or attachment figure or is expected to leave. The relationship is closely related to unresolved dependency relationships (Fremont, 2003). In the studies (Bagnell, 2011; Christogiorgos & Giannakopoulos, 2014) presented that mothers of school refused children prefer them to be dependent on them. On the other hand, general anxiety, another kind of anxiety, leads to school refusal behavior. Children with generalized anxiety are constantly concerned about future events. They are worried about not enough in various fields such as school success and sporting activities. Family dynamics, dependent parental attitudes, and realistic fears can emerge anxiety and the effect of anxiety also leads to school refusal behaviors. For these reasons, instead of to force the children to return to school, to enrich and to change the parent-child relationship is the best way to deal with the problems.

In our study, it was obtained that depression is another predictive variable on school refusal. The finding is supported by previous studies. Egger, Castello and Angold (2003) claimed that depression can be accompanied by strong levels of anxiety and the researchers point out that a proportion of young people who suffer from some symptoms such as using alcohol and drugs, school refusal, and anxiety. In a similar study, Reid (2000) pointed that school refusers have difficulties sleeping, low self-esteem, a low academic self-concept, and a heightened sensitivity to school failures. They added that these are reasons for emotional problems such as depression.

Depression among children and adolescents is closely associated with irritability and feeling low. If feeling low endure for long periods, children suffering from depression can suddenly lose the ability to obtain pleasure from everyday activities, can isolate themselves entirely from both friends and family and it can manifest itself in a refusal to go to school. After that, attention and concentration difficulties can occur because of depression (Egger et al., 2003). Moreover, the characteristic of the parents is accepted as risk factors for school refusal. Studies (Bahalı, 2008; Bahalı, Tahiroğlu, Avci, and Seydaoğlu, 2011; Martin, Cabrol, Bouvard, Lepine, & Mouren-Simeoni, 1999; Özcan, Kılıç, Aysev, 2006) pointed that the parents of the children experiencing school refusal had higher anxiety and clear signs of depression. These are interactional factors to emerge school refusal. In parallel with the literature, it has been revealed once again in our study that the problems created by depression are also effective in school refusal.

Another predictive variable on school refusal was negative thoughts. Negative thoughts can be regarded as one of the keys for school refusal. Negative attributions related to self and school such as friends, teachers, school environment, social threat, personal failure, and over generalization may cause the problem. The attributions that the child will be inadequate at school constitute negative thoughts about the self and this results in school refusal. These cognitive distortion affects children both academic success and emotional status (Maric, Heyne, MacKinnon, Widenfelt, and Westenberg, 2012). When the negative thoughts level gets higher, children start to feel everything would be worse. Because of negative thoughts prevent refusers to solve their problems effectively, the thoughts trigger to yield negative events, and anxiety occurs inevitably (Dube & Orpinas, 2009). So this situation creates a vicious cycle.

When the predictive power of attachment styles was analysed, it was found that attachment styles did not predict school refusal as the main variable. The findings are inconsistent with previous studies (Barth, 1984; Kearney and Hugelshofer, 2000; Last & Strauss, 1990). In our study, although the correlations were gained among attachments styles and school refusal behaviour, attachment styles had not predictive power on the main variable. This is an unexpected result because as known, attachment based on caregiver-child interactional relationships. In anxiety styles, children are hesitating whether the caregiver is available and reachable. For this reason, children demonstrate adherence to the caregiver, excessive

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concentration to attachment figure instead of exploring the environment, failure to cope with absence of attachment figure, and lack of social relationships (Haugaard and Hazan, 2004). On the other hand, in the avoidance style the child tends to be indifferent to the caregiver, move away and usually avoid her/him. According to these characteristics avoidant attachment style may not be a predictor of school refusal. However, the children having this style are also insufficient to problem solving. In this case, when they have some school related problems, they may not cope with the problems effectively and that may result in school refusal. Thus our findings suggest that the predictivity of attachment styles on school refusal should be examined from a personal perspective with the qualitative method to understand the meaning of the attachment and to see its effects.

Some demographical variables related to school refusal were also investigated. The results indicated that gender had not yield any differences on school refusal. There are inconsistent study findings in literature. In some studies (Heyne, King, Tonge, & Cooper, 2001; King & Bernstein, 2001), it is reported that school refusal is at equal rates in both genders, while in the other study (Nishida, Sugiyama, Aoki, & Kuroda, 2004) higher rates are shown in men. Based on the results, it can be stated that roots of school refusal behaviours have more specific features instead of gender stereotypes.

Perceived socio-economic level were also taken into consideration as a variable. Results presented that perceived socio-economic level has an effect on children's school refusal behaviours. When means were compared, it could be seen that the difference occurs between the lowest and the highest status. It means that children having lowest socio-economic level are more likely to experience school refusal. Perception of lower socio-economic level affects person's evaluations in related to self, others, and world negatively. It is known that these negative evaluations, which have been improved, adversely impress academic life. This situation may be considered to lead up to school refusal. Similarly, Egger Castello, and Angold (2003) described a group of school refusers who have experience anxiety and depression. They also indicated that the lower socio-economic status leads higher absenteeism rates.

Finally, the effect of the education level of parents was examined. The findings showed that parents' education status did not yield any differences. Kearney, Memos and Silverman (2006) claimed that external variables often play a key role in school refusal behaviour. Parental education level as a non-psychological factor is seen one of the variables and it is inversely associated with child absenteeism. Similarly, Bahalı, Tahiroğlu, Avcı, and Seydaoğlu, (2011) also found that parents in the school refusal group had lower levels of education compared with the controls. However, the finding of our study suggests that attitudes and behaviours of parents should be examined instead of education level of.

It can be concluded from the research findings that there are significant relationships among school refusal, attachment styles, anxiety, depression, and negative thoughts. Moreover, anxiety, depression, and negative thoughts significantly predict school refusal whereas attachment styles did not. Our findings in some aspects are convenient with previous studies and related literature but in some aspect not related to them. So it is needed more researches conducting with different study designs to generalize findings of our research.

The relationship among school refusal, attachment styles, anxiety-depression and negative thoughts is very important for psychological counsellors especially for who work in schools. School refusal may interrupt to develop positive self-perception and healthy social relations of the refusers. Beside to emotional problems, many social and academic problems can arise such as withdrawing from friends, not being accepted by peers, academic failure etc.

It is crucial that counsellor should be aware of the factors causing the problems, apply individual and group training programs to cope with them. Skills and communication training

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should be carried out in the classroom and all of the pupils are encouraged to participate. Therefore, these interventions will contribute positively to the child, the family, the school, and the society. On the other hand, school refusal is also vital for national education system. Because this problem affects the educational investments and the development of the country.

In conclusion further researches that will be carried out on the predictors of school refusal (attachment, anxiety, depression and negative thoughts) may help to grow up psychologically healthier generations.

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