



Intervention for School Anxiety and Absenteeism in Children (ISAAC): Co-designing and piloting an online parent-focused programme for emotionally-based school avoidance in primary school-aged children

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Public Summary:

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly increased children's school absences. This rise has been linked to increasing Emotionally-Based School Avoidance (EBSA). Early interventions for EBSA in primary school-aged children are scarce and challenging to access.

This PhD project consisted of three studies that use a person-based approach to create a brief parent-focused intervention for EBSA in primary school-aged children. Study 1) Qualitative surveys and interviews with parents and educational professionals to explore school attendance problems in the context of Covid-19. Study 2) Co-design workshops and consultations with parents and practitioners to develop an intervention blueprint from stakeholders' insights and priorities. Study 3) Mixed-methods trialling the feasibility and acceptability of the subsequently developed intervention prototype: Intervention for school anxiety and absenteeism (ISAAC).

Intervention was found to be needed for primary school children struggling with EBSA. Three risk factors were identified as important in addressing this issue: parent wellbeing, parental accommodating behaviours and school-home communication. These risk factors were integrated into an intervention with stakeholders informing the format. The intervention was structured into three online modules delivered over three weeks, each encompassing psychoeducational videos, self-completed learning tasks and a corresponding coaching session. This intervention was found to be feasible to deliver and acceptable to parents. Parents particularly appreciated the coach's support and guidance.

Findings illustrate that early intervention is crucially needed for EBSA to address rising school absences. Such intervention should be readily accessible for parents, and the findings suggest that this can be facilitated through brief online delivery methods, supported by a non-expert, specifically designed to address modifiable risk factors.



Public and Community Involvement:

This project integrated the guidance and input provided by parents and professionals in developing the new intervention.

The engagement with stakeholders in this project began with the use of qualitative methods, including surveys (N = 29 parents; N = 19 educational professionals) and interviews (N = 10 parents; N = 12 educational professionals), to gather their insights.

Then involvement was a central part of developing the intervention with the use of co-design methods, which included workshops (N = 10 parents; N = 7 practitioners) and consultations (N = 4 parents; N = 3 practitioners). These activities aimed at collectively shaping the intervention.

Dissemination:

The different stages of this project have been shared as presentations and posters at relevant conferences. Including;

International Network for School Attendance 2021 and 2022.

BPS Psychology of Education Conference 2022

NIHR ARC autumn symposium 2021
University of Sussex Covid Research conference.

Poster awards given to at:
NIHR ARC researcher week 2021, 2022 and 2023.
University of Sussex researcher week.

Impact and Implementation:

In the last stage of this project, 9 parents participated in a small scale feasibility trial of the developed intervention; ISAAC.

Overall, the intervention was feasible to deliver to parents with 67% of participants completing the full intervention. Participants found the intervention acceptable within acceptability domains of affective attitude, burden, coherence, self-efficacy and perceived effectiveness. They particularly appreciated the coach's support. Outcomes were small to moderate with the largest effects observed on school avoidance ($d=0.51$) and family accommodations ($d=0.53$).

These results will be presented as a poster and shared with the professionals (School Mental Health Teams) who helped share the study with parents.

Publications

<https://bpspsychub.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/bjep.12562>

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/13591045231222648>

What next?

The detailed feedback from parents in our most recent study will be implemented and used to help refine ISAAC prior to further testing.