

## Differentiation Between School Attendance Problems: Why and How?

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*School attendance problems (SAPs) are heterogeneous with respect to etiology and presentation. The long history of conceptualizing SAPs has led to a vast array of terms and definitions as well as different perspectives on the most helpful approach to classification. For educators, practitioners, researchers, and policymakers, this presents a challenge in understanding, assessing, and intervening with SAPs. This paper outlines evolution in the conceptualization of SAPs, focusing on two contemporary approaches to differentiating between them. One approach draws on the longstanding differentiation between SAP types labeled school refusal, truancy, and school withdrawal. A fourth type of SAP, labeled school exclusion, is also considered. The other approach focuses on the function of absenteeism, measured via the School Refusal Assessment Scale (SRAS). Anecdotal and scientific support for the SAP typology is presented, along with the benefits and shortcomings of the SRAS approach to differentiation. The paper offers suggestions for how to differentiate between SAPs and introduces the SNACK, a brief screening measure that permits differentiation by SAP type.*

SCHOOL is a central context for development. A youth's<sup>1</sup> absence from this context has the potential to create or compound deviations in normal development. Nonattendance affects learning and achievement (Carroll, 2010) and higher rates of nonattendance are associated with greater declines in achievement (Gottfried, 2014). There is a risk for drug use (Henry & Huizinga, 2007), early school dropout (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007), and unemployment (Attwood & Croll, 2006). A significant number of nonattending youth become juvenile offenders, invoking the school-to-prison pipeline and ending their school career (Garry, 1996). Nonattendance can seriously disrupt a youth's social-emotional development (e.g., Garland, 2001; Hersov, 1990; Malcolm, Wilson, Davidson, & Kirk, 2003) and many youth who have difficulty attending school have mental health disorders (Heyne & Sauter, 2013). The need for effective intervention for school attendance problems (SAPs) is evident. Intervention is informed by assessment, but the assessment process is complicated by several factors. SAPs present in many ways and they are associated with many risk factors (Heyne & Sauter, 2013;

Kearney, 2008a, 2008c; Maynard, Salas-Wright, Vaughn, & Peters, 2012). In addition, professionals are confronted with varied and changing perspectives on how to conceptualize and classify SAPs, reflected in the wide range of terms used (see Table 1).

Complicating matters, terms are used inconsistently. For example, truancy often refers to a SAP characterized by absence from school without parental knowledge or consent (e.g., Galloway, 1976; Huffington & Sevti, 1989), but some use it to refer to all unexcused absences (Fantuzzo, Grim, & Hazan, 2005) or problematic absenteeism (e.g., Bimler & Kirkland, 2001). Some use intentionality to determine the presence of truancy (e.g., deliberately skipping school) while others simply focus on persistent absence, explaining why truancy and chronic absenteeism are used interchangeably (Gentle-Genitty, Karikari, Chen, Wilka, & Kim, 2015). Truants have been referred to as youth kept at home because of their benefit to parents (Berry & Lizardi, 1985; Elliott, 1999), even though this phenomenon had already been referred to as school withdrawal. The terms school avoidance, school reluctance, and school refusal have been used interchangeably when referring to school-phobic youth (Berry & Lizardi, 1985), and school refusal is sometimes used as an umbrella term for anxiety-based school refusal and truancy (e.g., Egger, Costello, & Angold, 2003; Pilkington & Piersel, 1991).

It has been suggested that the problems referred to as "school refusal" and "truancy" be regarded collectively as

<sup>1</sup> The term 'youth' is used to refer to children and adolescents.

Table 1

Chronological Overview of Terms Used in English-Language Literature to Refer to School Refusal, School Withdrawal, and Collections of School Attendance Problems

Terms	Year	Author(s)
<i>Terms for what is commonly understood as school refusal</i>		
A form of truancy associated with neurosis	1932	Broadwin
Psychoneurotic type of truancy; stay-at-home neuroses	1939	Partridge
School phobia	1941	Johnson, Falstein, Szurek, and Svendsen
Refusal to go to school / reluctance to go to school	1945	Klein
Separation anxiety	1956	Estes, Haylett, and Johnson
A variety of separation anxiety	1957	Kanner
School anxiety	1959	Morgan
Mother-philes	1960	Davidson
School refusal	1960a	Hersov
Emotional absenteeism	1964	Frick
Inappropriate home-bound school absence	1980	Waller and Eisenberg
Masquerade syndrome as a variant of school phobia	1980	Waller and Eisenberg
School refusal syndrome	1985	Atkinson, Quarrington, and Cyr
Psychological absentee	1985	Reid
Anxiety-based school refusal	1990	Last and Strauss
Internalizing school refusal disorder	1990	Young, Brasic, Kisnadwala, and Leven <sup>a</sup>
Anxious school refusal	1993	Mouren-Simeoni <sup>b</sup>
School refusal behavior	1993	Kearney <sup>c</sup>
Extended school non-attendance	2014	Gregory and Purcell
School reluctant	2015	Jones and Suveg
<i>Terms for what is commonly understood as school withdrawal</i>		
Unwitting, even willful encouragement of the parents	1932	Broadwin
Withdrawal of the child from school	1962	Kahn and Nursten
Voluntary absence with parental assent	1969	Berg, Nichols, and Pritchard
Parent-condoned category	1977	Hersov <sup>d</sup>
School withdrawal; parental complicity	1978	Berg, Butler, Hullin, Smith, & Tyrer
Voluntary withholding by a parent	1980	Galloway
Family-motivated truancy	1981	Amatu
Condoned absence	1985	Galloway
Covert support for non-attendance	1987	Blagg
Parent-motivated school withdrawal	1996	Kearney & Silverman
Parentally condoned absence	1997	Berg
<i>Terms for collections of school attendance problems</i>		
Truancy (all types)	1915	Hiatt
Failures of school attendance (all types)	1962	Kahn and Nursten
Persistent absenteeism (all types)	1976	Galloway
School attendance problems (all types)	1980	Rubenstein and Hastings
Persistent unauthorized absence (all types)	1982	Galloway
Pupil absenteeism (all types)	1986	Carroll
School avoidance behavior (all types)	1990	Taylor & Adelman
School refusal behavior (SR+TR)	1993	Kearney
Child-motivated refusal to attend school (SR+TR)	1996	Kearney and Silverman
Truancy (enrolled, no good reason for absence)	2001	Bimler and Kirkland
School avoidance (all types)	2002	Berg
School refusal (SR+TR)	2003	Egger, Costello, and Angold
Non-child-motivated absenteeism (all except SR+TR)	2003	Kearney
Chronic non-attendance (all types)	2003	Lauchlan
School attendance difficulties (all types)	2005	Sheppard
Extended school non-attendance (SR+TR)	2007	Pellegrini
Educational neglect (all types)	2011	Larson, Zuel, and Swanson
Voluntary and involuntary absenteeism (all types)	2016	Birioukov

<sup>a</sup> Cited in Kearney (2003); <sup>b</sup> Cited in Martin, Cabrol, Bouvard, Lepine, & Mouren-Simeoni (1999); <sup>c</sup> The term was previously used by Kearney and Silverman (1990), but not defined; <sup>d</sup> Cited in Galloway (1980). SR = school refusal; TR = truancy.

“school refusal behavior” (e.g., Kearney, 2003; Lyon & Cotler, 2007). Others maintain the distinction between school refusal and truancy (e.g., Elliott & Place, 2012; Goodman & Scott, 2012; Havik, Bru, & Ertesvåg, 2015a; Hella & Bernstein, 2012; Heyne, Sauter, & Maynard, 2015; Torrens Salemi & McCormack Brown, 2003). The collective term “school refusal behavior” is sometimes shortened to “school refusal” (e.g., Lyon & Cotler, 2007), yielding more confusion. It has also been used to refer to an attendance problem separate from truancy (e.g., Doobay, 2008) and as an attendance problem characterized only by emotional upset (e.g., Nuttall & Woods, 2013), even though the origins of the term “school refusal behavior” point to a different meaning. Furthermore, the all-encompassing term “problematic absenteeism” is used interchangeably with “school refusal behavior” (Kearney, 2016), even though the latter was originally intended to exclude school withdrawal.

The obscured conceptualization of absenteeism stems from the different backgrounds and objectives of researchers (Birioukov, 2016). A shared understanding of SAPs is needed (Pellegrini, 2007) because inconsistencies and ambiguity are obstacles to the advancement of assessment, intervention, and scientific knowledge surrounding SAPs (Kearney, 2003). In this paper we provide an updated review of the conceptualization of problematic absenteeism and the differentiation between SAP types, namely school refusal (SR), truancy (TR), school withdrawal (SW), and school exclusion (SE). We then consider anecdotal and scientific support for differentiating between these SAP types, along with the benefits and shortcomings of a functional analytic approach to differentiating between youth with SAPs. The final section provides practical tips for differentiating between SR, TR, SW, and SE, and it introduces a screening measure to support efficient identification of these SAP types.

### **Differentiation Between Nonproblematic Absenteeism and School Attendance Problems**

Before differentiating between SAPs based on type or function, we (educators, practitioners, researchers, and policymakers) need to be able to determine whether absenteeism is problematic. Reliable differentiation between problematic absenteeism (i.e., SAPs) and nonproblematic absenteeism has practical and scientific benefits. Practically, school communities can write attendance policies about when to intervene, and parents have a clear idea about when to seek assistance. Scientifically, the consistent use of criteria for selecting youth with SAPs permits meaningful comparisons across studies and, by extension, across different countries. Standard cut-offs can also be established for judging whether interventions have successfully remediated SAPs.

To promote international consistency, Kearney (2003) proposed that nonproblematic absenteeism be defined as short-term or long-term absence that is “agreed on by parents and school officials as legitimate in nature and not involving detriment to the child” (p. 59). It may be caused, for example, by illness, religious holidays, or natural disasters, and the absence can be compensated for (e.g., home-schooling or credit by examination). Thus, youth not attending school but engaged in alternative forms of education (e.g., home-schooling; online education) would not be regarded as displaying a SAP. Problematic absenteeism was defined as a 2-week period of: (a) more than 50% absence; or (b) difficulty attending school (e.g., skipping classes; anxiety about school while still attending) that significantly interferes in the youth’s or family’s daily routine. The 2-week criterion was applied because temporary absenteeism is common and often not problematic. Five years later Kearney (2008a) revised the criteria, revealing continued evolution in the field. The 2-week period was retained but the threshold for absence was reduced. The first two criteria are: “(1) have missed at least 25 percent of total school time for at least two weeks; (2) experience severe difficulty attending classes for at least two weeks with significant interference in a child’s or family’s daily routine” (p. 265). A third criterion was added: “and/or are absent<sup>2</sup> for at least 10 days of school during any 15-week period while school is in session (i.e., a minimum of 15 percent days absent from school)” (p. 265). This was added to encourage intervention with youth whose sporadic absenteeism is nonetheless problematic.

The notion of legitimate versus illegitimate absence, as seen in Kearney’s (2003) writing, is similar but not identical to differentiations made between excused and unexcused absence, and between authorized and unauthorized absence (see Gentle-Genitty et al., 2015). On the one hand, there appears to be some benefit in distinguishing between excused and unexcused absence. Youth with a higher proportion of unexcused absences to total absences have been found to be at greater academic risk than those with a higher proportion of excused absences to total absences (Gottfried, 2009). On the other hand, the potential unreliability or even dishonesty in parents’ explanations for a child’s absence make it difficult to distinguish between authorized and unauthorized absences (Reid, 2014). Birioukov (2016) questioned the distinction between excused and unexcused absences, based on the questionable validity of the assumptions that schools and families make about a youth’s absences (i.e., whether it was really excusable or not). Kearney (2016) also noted the possible detrimental distinction between excused and unexcused absence if a youth has

<sup>2</sup>Youth were regarded as absent on a particular day if they missed at least 25% of that school day.

many absences that are technically excused but the absences mask serious problems.

Several shortcomings in [Kearney's \(2008a\)](#) definition of problematic absenteeism are its inclusion of nonspecific criteria (e.g., significant interference in routine) and the fact that the 25% criterion appeared to be based on expert opinion rather than studies showing that 25% is a meaningful cut-point for specifying the existence of a SAP. Nonetheless, the definition goes a long way towards bringing needed consensus to the field. Indeed, we see a growing consensus in the literature, with various authors using [Kearney's \(2008a\)](#) criteria to define SAPs. At the same time, there is dramatic variation in the way local and national authorities signal the presence of a SAP ([Gentle-Genitty et al., 2015](#)). This could occur if the people responsible for developing school policy at a local level are not familiar with [Kearney's \(2008a\)](#) criteria. It is also possible that organizations at the state or national levels are hesitant to encourage the adoption of a specific set of criteria when none of the many definitions of problematic absenteeism is clearly best practice. On the one hand, it is pragmatic to employ locally defined definitions and measures of absenteeism ([Birioukov, 2016](#)). On the other hand, it reduces our capacity to compare and synthesize results across studies. Even if consistency is achieved with respect to how much nonattendance is regarded as problematic, variation can occur in the time-frame of interest, the requirement for reporting, and the degree of adherence to a prescribed set of criteria.

### Differentiation Between Types of School Attendance Problems

After a problematic level of absenteeism has been identified, attention turns to understanding the type of attendance problem at hand. An indirect reference to different SAP types is found in [Hiatt's \(1915\)](#) early account of individualized care based on different factors associated with absence (e.g., involvement of the social agency for families in distress; prosecution when absence stems from parental neglect). A direct reference to different SAP types appeared in [Broadwin's \(1932\)](#) account of "a form of truancy ... [which] occurs in a child who is suffering from a deep-seated neurosis" (p. 254). Thereafter, efforts to identify SAP types burgeoned (e.g., [Eisenberg, 1958](#); [Kahn & Nursten, 1962](#); [Partridge, 1939](#); [Reid, 1985](#)) and subdivisions within SAP types were also proposed. In the 1980s reviews of SR subtyping appeared. In the first of these, [Atkinson, Quarrington, and Cyr \(1985\)](#) stated that "the homogeneity of the school refusal concept has repeatedly come under question" (p. 86). They argued for continued work on differentiation to develop differential interventions. Subsequent reviews of differences among SR youth were reported by [Burke and Silverman \(1987\)](#) and [Pritchard, King, Tonge,](#)

[Heyne, and Lancaster \(1998\)](#). Relatively less work has been done to investigate subtypes of TR ([Maynard et al., 2012](#)). A description of SW subtypes is found in [Reid \(2002\)](#).

To harmonize the conceptualization of SAPs and the use of terminology, we review the features of three predominant SAP types, namely SR, TR, and SW. We also consider SE as a fourth type of SAP.

### School Refusal

Following the work of [Broadwin \(1932\)](#), authors began demarcating a SAP different from TR based on the presence of neuroticism. This type of SAP was then referred to as school phobia ([Johnson, Falstein, Szurek, & Svendsen, 1941](#)), which was described as "a particular syndrome of neurotic behavior" ([Eisenberg, 1958, p. 712](#)). The references to neuroticism and phobia point to the emotion-related aspect of this type of SAP.

In 1969 Berg and colleagues presented a set of features to select and study youth with SR.<sup>3</sup> Some features had already been mentioned in the literature (e.g., [Morgan, 1959](#); [Warren, 1948](#)) as had the term "refusal to go to school" (e.g., [Hersov, 1960b](#); [Kahn & Nursten, 1962](#); [Klein, 1945](#); [Warren, 1948](#)). However, [Berg et al. \(1969\)](#) are credited with providing the first comprehensive set of defining features, and these features formed the basis for what are now the most commonly used criteria for SR. The features were initially presented as: "(1) severe difficulty attending school ...; (2) severe emotional upset ...; (3) staying at home with the knowledge of the parents ...; (4) absence of significant antisocial disorders" (p. 123).

The first feature—severe difficulty attending school—did not require complete refusal to go to school because other factors (e.g., the attitude of parents) could influence whether a youth's difficulty attending resulted in nonattendance. According to [Atkinson, Quarrington, Cyr, and Atkinson \(1989\)](#), reluctance to attend was the essential component of SR. Researchers have operationalized the first feature in various ways. [Blagg and Yule \(1984\)](#) defined it as "extreme difficulty in attending school with refusal and absence from school for at least three days" (p. 119). In other SR studies youth were selected if absence in the prior month was at least 10% ([Last, Hansen, & Franco, 1998](#)) to at least 50% ([Melvin et al., 2017](#)).

The second feature—severe emotional upset—could take various forms such as fear, depression, willfulness, and complaints of feeling unwell in the absence of an obvious organic cause. In this way "an observable antipathy to school" needed to be present ([Berg et al., 1969](#),

<sup>3</sup> They employed the term "school phobia" because it was used interchangeably with SR at the time.

p. 133). The reference to antipathy suggests, indirectly, that voluntary absence with parental assent should not be regarded as SR. A later study of SR included the specification “resisted parental efforts to persuade him/her to go and remained at home with mother,” implying that parents would have made efforts to get the child to school (Berg et al., 1985, p. 158). Bools, Foster, Brown, and Berg (1990) subsequently specified that there had to be “reasonable parental pressure” for school attendance (p. 180), presumably to differentiate between cases of SR and SW. The reference to parental pressure also appears in Berg’s (1996, 2002) later work.

Berg (1996) elaborated upon the “emotional upset” feature, drawing on Atkinson et al.’s (1985) work. The specifier “severe” was removed, and emotional upset could be confined to the situation of leaving home to go to school or be part of a more general disorder characterized by anxiety and depression. Berg (1996) also noted that determined resistance may occur in the absence of other signs of fearfulness. This helps redress the difficulty Bools et al. (1990) identified, with respect to determining whether the youth’s behavior on school mornings reflects emotional upset or defiance. In some treatment outcome studies, the second feature of SR was operationalized as the presence of an internalizing disorder (e.g., Bernstein et al., 2000). This was done to identify youth with more severe SR and thus provide a more rigorous test of treatment efficacy. However, a diagnosed internalizing disorder is not a prerequisite for SR classification. Sleep disturbance has also been used to operationalize the emotional upset experienced by SR youth (Blagg & Yule, 1984).

The third feature—staying at home with the knowledge of the parents—served to exclude cases of TR that were held to involve the concealment of nonattendance from parents. If the young person concealed nonattendance in the past and this was discovered, they needed to show subsequent signs of SR, staying at home when not at school, in order to fulfill criteria for SR. In the study of Bools et al. (1990), the third criterion about staying at home included “with parents, *or other family member*” (p. 180; emphasis added). In 1992 Berg described SR youth as those who remain at home “upset at the prospect of attending school while *sharing the problem with other members of the family*” (p. 154, emphasis added).

The fourth feature—absence of significant antisocial disorders—was included because prior literature suggested that SR youth do not display the severe antisocial behaviors typical of TR youth. Bools et al. (1990) operationalized this feature as the absence of the diagnosis of conduct disorder (CD). In 1996 Berg clarified that while some SR youth may display aggressive and resistive behavior, this is essentially confined to the home, and other antisocial tendencies such as stealing

and destructiveness are absent. This was subsequently specified as follows: “manifests no severe antisocial tendencies, apart from possible aggressiveness when attempts are made to force school attendance” (Berg, 1997, p. 90).

In 2002 Berg presented the defining features of SR in this way: “(1) The child remains at home with the knowledge of the parents ...; (2) There is an absence of severe antisocial behavior ...; (3) Parents make reasonable attempts to secure their child’s attendance at school ...; (4) There is emotional upset at the prospect of having to go to school ...” (p. 1261). Criterion 1 (previously the third feature) was described as a necessary, if not a sufficient, criterion for determining that SR exists. Criterion 2 (previously the fourth feature) and Criterion 1 were both described as being in marked contrast to TR. Criterion 3 formalized parental efforts to secure attendance, deliberately differentiating between SR and SW. Criterion 4 (previously the second feature) appears to subsume the first feature (difficulty attending school).

### Truancy

TR has been defined narrowly and broadly (Berg, 1997). This complicates reviews of its conceptualization and the interpretation of results from studies of TR. According to the narrow definition, TR occurs when youth are away from school and try to conceal this from their parents, further outlined below. A broad definition of TR encompasses “unwarranted absence from school more generally” (p. 91). In the context of this broad definition, Berg noted that parents are sometimes irresponsible, making feeble excuses for their child’s absence. This suggests a degree of parent-condoned absence that is often conceptualized separately as SW (see next section, “School Withdrawal”). Currently, both the narrow and broad conceptualizations of TR are found in the literature.

A study by Gentle-Genitty et al. (2015) included two aims: (1) to synthesize a vast amount of literature on the operational definitions of TR, and (2) to establish a unified definition of TR. Truancy definitions were extracted following literature searches using the keywords “truancy,” “school non-attendance,” and “dropouts” (see Table 2), pointing to the use of a broader definition of TR. Regarding the first aim, it was found that definitions customarily take one of two positions. Definitions are based on the person, or based on the behavior or consequences. Examples of definitions based on the person include: youth registered but not attending (Collins, 1998), youth missing 20% or more of school days within a 6-week period (OJJDP, 2006), and youth who depart post-registration (Galloway, 1980). A stated advantage of this kind of definition is that school systems are helped to recognize not only the behavior (truancy) but also the person (truant). Among the definitions that focused on

Table 2  
Common Themes From the Literature on Truancy in the U.S.

Category	Author(s) & Year	Definition(s) and Conception(s) of Truancy
School Perspectives: Unacceptable behavior	Barry, Chaney & Chaney (2011); Henry (2007; 2010); McNeal Jr. (1999)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Skipping or cutting school/classes.</li> <li>• Intentional absence from school; intentionally leaving school early, or intentionally missing classes.</li> <li>• School non-attendance.</li> </ul>
	DeSocio et al. (2007); Fantuzzo, Grim, and Hazan (2005); Lehr, Sinclair and Christenson (2004); McCray (2006); Newsome, Anderson-Butcher, Fink, Hall, and Huffer (2008); Rhodes, Thomas, Lemieux, Cain and Guin (2010); Sinha (2007)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unexcused absences from school or classes.</li> <li>• Unexcused absences from school; chronic unexcused</li> <li>• School absenteeism.</li> <li>• Staying away without permission.</li> <li>• Unexcused absence from school; absenteeism.</li> <li>• Chronic absenteeism; any unexcused absence including missing specific classes.</li> <li>• Unexcused absence of students from school.</li> </ul>
	Gastic (2008); Henry, Thornberry, and Huizinga (2009); Henry and Thornberry (2010); Rhodes and Reiss (1969); Ventura and Miller (2005); Zhang, Katsiyannis, Barrett, and Willson (2007); Zhang et al. (2010)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unexcused absences from school for the entire day or a particular extracurricular activity.</li> <li>• The study also discussed thoughts of intentionally missing school as playing a role in truancy.</li> <li>• Skipping school without a valid excuse.</li> <li>• Physical withdrawal from school and labeled it as active avoidance.</li> <li>• Absenteeism from school.</li> <li>• Habitual engagement in unexcused absences from school.</li> </ul>
	Dube and Orpinas (2009)  Kearney (2006b, 2007, 2008a)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Absent without knowledge of parents; excessive absenteeism.</li> <li>• Part of a collective of school avoiding behaviors considered to be problematic. Manifestations of such behavior include anxiety while in school, skipping some classes and not attending school.</li> <li>• School refusal behavior is the overarching concept of such behavior.</li> <li>• Illegal, unexcused absence from school; absenteeism without parents knowledge; excessive absenteeism marked by child anxiety as well absence from school correlated with deviant behavior and academic problems, family related problems and socio-economic disadvantage.</li> </ul>
Student Perspective: Distance from School	Epstein and Sheldon (2002)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focuses on students distancing themselves from school; and issues related to rates of daily student attendance.</li> </ul>
	Fallis and Opotow (2003); Hallfors et al. (2002); Walls (2003)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Class cutting.</li> <li>• Presents it as a deliberate act in an effort to avoid certain people or courses.</li> <li>• Makes an important observation that “cutting is the slow-motion process of dropping out made class-by-class and day-by-day in students’ daily lives” (p. 104).</li> <li>• Skipping school; cutting classes.</li> <li>• Truancy is an indicator of low school attachment.</li> <li>• Always late to class; not showing up to class for more than 3 days.</li> </ul>

From “Truancy: A look at definitions in the USA and other territories” by Gentle-Genitty, Karikari, Chen, Wilka, and Kim, 2015, *Educational Studies*, 41, p. 68. Copyright by Taylor & Francis Ltd., [www.tandfonline.com](http://www.tandfonline.com). Reprinted with permission.

TR as a behavior, the themes of “intent” and “concealment” emerged.

Intent to be absent from school was found in references to students absenting themselves from particular lessons or leaving school early, deliberately “cutting classes” or

“skipping school” (e.g., Barry, Chaney, & Chaney, 2011; Fallis & Opotow, 2003; Henry, 2007, 2010). An earlier suggestion of intent is found in the work of Williams (1927), who linked the TR youth’s absence with willfulness on the youth’s behalf. More recently, Keppens and Spruyt (2017b)

noted that some authors only apply TR to those cases where the intention of the absence rests fully with the student, whereas other authors argue that it is often difficult to distinguish between absence motivated by parents and absence stemming from the youth's intent, such that the distinction is not made. This echoes Berg's (1997) reference to narrow and broad definitions of TR.

The concealment of absenteeism was predominantly addressed indirectly in Gentle-Genitty and colleagues' (2015) review. Their only direct reference to concealment was to note that Berg's (1997) criteria for SR state that SR youth do not attempt to conceal the problem from parents. Regarding TR, Gentle-Genitty and colleagues indirectly addressed the issue of concealment by including references to the parents' lack of knowledge of their child's absence from school (e.g., Dube & Orpinas, 2009). From early on, in fact, TR was defined as absence from school "without the knowledge and consent of the parents" (Williams, 1927, p. 277). Galloway (1976) added that TR can also be hidden from school authorities when youth absent themselves after the registration of morning attendance. Berg et al. (1985) differentiated between SR and TR based on the fact that the parents of TR youth do not know of their child's whereabouts when they are not at school. According to Pilkington and Piersel (1991), "parents are *typically* unaware" of the absence (p. 292, emphasis added), implying that parents will sometimes be aware. Certainly, parents become aware once the absence is identified by the school and reported to the parents. In Egger and colleagues' (2003) community study of TR and SR, TR youth were defined as those "who failed to reach or left school without the permission of school authorities, without an excuse (such as illness), and for reasons not associated with anxiety about separation or school" (p. 799). Notably, this definition does not include reference to a lack of parental knowledge or consent. The issue of parental consent is interesting. Even though it appeared in Williams' (1927) early account of TR, and Galloway (1985) noted that TR definitions had focused on the lack of parental consent, it is not consistently included in TR definitions.

The second aim of the Gentle-Genitty et al. (2015) study was to establish a unified definition of TR. A definition was crafted and refined based on a review of the literature and focus groups conducted with members of the International Association for Truancy and Dropout Prevention. The final definition read: "truancy is a non-home school student's act of non-attendance evidenced by missing part or all of the school day without it being authorized by medical practitioner or sanctioned by parent(s) and/or legitimately excused by school or per state law" (p. 78). Home-schooled students were excluded because there were no systems to track students who attend school at home and are taught by parents or other guardians. Thus, measuring home-schooled students' absences leading to a TR record would be almost

impossible. Gentle-Genitty and colleagues' definition also separated the person from the behavior, whereby the behavior is the act of nonattendance, specified as missing school time in situations that are not authorized by a medical practitioner and not sanctioned by parents, the school, or the law. The authors noted that their definition was a first iteration requiring further refinement. Because Gentle-Genitty et al. (2015) reviewed literature on "non-attendance" alongside literature on "truancy," the resulting definition reflects the broader definition of TR.

Most recently, Keppens and Spruyt (2017b) stated that the literature is "haunted by the absence of a uniform definition of truancy" (p. 122). Their inventive study, aimed at shedding light on the conceptualization of TR, included a wide range of variables such as the location of the absence, whether it occurred alone or in groups, whether the parents knew about the absence, and whether the parents (dis)approved of the absence. Cluster analysis yielded three statistically distinguishable TR subtypes. The "homestay" subtype (40% of youth) was likened to "parent-motivated truancy" (i.e., SW) because youth stayed home when not at school and their parents were aware of the absence. In this respect the subtype does not correspond with the narrower definition of TR. The second largest cluster (33% of youth) comprised youth whose parents did not know about the absenteeism and who spent time away from home when not at school. Keppens and Spruyt described this type of TR as more in keeping with what most people think of as TR, and it was labeled "traditional truants." The third cluster (27% of youth), like the first, comprised youth whose parents knew about the absenteeism. In these cases, however, youth were away from home when not at school, and in the company of others. This subtype was labeled "condoned social truants." Parental (dis)approval of the absence was not found to influence the formation of the three clusters.

Keppens and Spruyt's (2017b) operationalization of TR was based on an item asking youth whether they had "skipped school without a valid reason." This could explain the fact that one of the subtypes they identified resembled SW. The notion of "skipping school without a valid reason" is open to broad interpretation. Youth could have interpreted "without a valid reason" to mean "due to a general fear of school" (e.g., SR), "to go shopping with my mother" (e.g., SW), or "to secretly spend time with friends outside of school" (e.g., more traditional TR). Other studies have used a similarly broad operationalization of the TR construct. For example, the Maynard et al. (2013) review of interventions for "chronic truant students" included studies in which authors identified youth as "being truant or having an attendance problem" (p. 7) other than SR. This operationalization opened the possibility that SW cases were included in the various studies, as occurred in Keppens and Spruyt's (2017b) study. In Keppens and Spruyt's (2017a) following study,

the definition of TR included reference to the parent's motivation, specifically because their prior study (2017b) indicated that about half of the parents of so-called truanting youth knew of or even permitted the youths' absences. They used a modified version of [Gentle-Genitty and colleagues' \(2015\)](#) definition, including "parental motivation" and excluding the specification of non-home-school students. Their definition read: "a student's act or parentally motivated act of non-attendance evidenced by missing part or all of the school day without it being legitimately excused by school or per state law" (p. 357). This broad definition of TR, intentionally incorporating SW, may hinder science and practice that relies on a differentiation between TR and SW.

A final comment on the TR literature is in order. In a list of types of TR, [Reid \(2014\)](#) referred to specific lesson absence and postregistration TR. The former suggests that TR may occur within the school setting and the latter indicates that absence does not need to involve the whole school day. Perhaps these are best regarded as specifiers for the location or timing of TR, rather than as different types of SAPs.

### School Withdrawal

Long before the term SW was used, authors referred to absenteeism predominantly motivated by parent factors. [Hiatt's \(1915\)](#) report on "truancy" cases described absence resulting from parental neglect, with 11 of 100 youth being allowed to stay home, perhaps doing chores. [Broadwin \(1932\)](#) noted that "unwitting and even willful encouragement" by parents was a recognized reason for absenteeism (p. 235), and [Kahn and Nursten \(1962\)](#) wrote about a SAP different from TR and SR, characterized by parents deliberately withdrawing the child from school because of their own needs.

In the 1970s [Berg and colleagues](#) introduced the term SW. A factor that emerged from [Berg, Butler, Hullin, Smith, and Tyrer's \(1978\)](#) factor analytic study of youth with SAPs was labeled SW because of the substantial loadings of variables related to parental compliance and adverse social factors. Items in the factor included "parents do not attempt to get the child to school" and "parents aware the child is not at school." Parental irresponsibility was emphasized because the child's absence was encouraged "by socially deviant parents who do not accept their responsibilities in this direction" (p. 447). In subsequent studies, absenteeism that did not fulfil criteria for TR or SR was attributed to parents' connivance and encouragement ([Berg et al., 1985](#)) and to parental collusion ([Bools et al., 1990](#)). [Berg \(1992\)](#) explained that SW occurs when absenteeism is condoned or encouraged by irresponsible parents, and feeble excuses are made for the absence ([Berg, 1997](#)).

Other authors similarly referred to a SAP characterized by parental factors. [Blagg \(1987\)](#) wrote of the family's covert support for absenteeism and [Hersov \(1990\)](#) referred to parents withholding or withdrawing their child from school. [Galloway \(1980\)](#) reported that many primary and secondary school students were absent with their parents' "knowledge, consent, and approval" and that parents were "unable or unwilling to insist on return" (p. 153). According to [Galloway \(1982\)](#), absence occurs because of the family's difficulty in getting the child to school rather than the child's difficulty in being at school, the latter being characteristic of SR. [Kearney and Silverman \(1996\)](#) introduced the term "parent-motivated school withdrawal" to differentiate between SW and child-motivated attendance problems (i.e., SR and TR). [Kearney \(2003\)](#) gave the example of parents claiming legitimate absence (e.g., illness) when this was not actually the case.

Reasons cited for parental withdrawal of a child from school are varied. Accounts based on SW in Western civilizations can be loosely grouped as family-, school-, and treatment-based reasons. Family-based reasons include the provision of company, comfort, or assistance to a family member such as a sibling, parent, or grandparent who is healthy or ill, physically or mentally ([Hersov, 1990](#); [Kearney, 2004](#); [Klerman, 1988](#); [Taylor & Adelman, 1990](#)). Assistance might include looking after younger siblings or doing housework or shopping ([Galloway, 1985](#); [Hersov, 1990](#); [Kearney, 2004](#); [Taylor & Adelman, 1990](#)). Other family-based reasons cited by [Kearney \(2004\)](#) include: to reduce the parent's own separation anxiety; for economic purposes, such as helping parents with their paid work; to prevent a child being kidnapped by an estranged partner or other family member; and to punish the child. School-based reasons cited by [Kearney \(2004\)](#) include: to protect the child from real or perceived threats at school; to hide something from school staff such as incomplete homework, malnutrition, maltreatment, or mental disorder; to be vindictive towards teachers with whom parents disagree; and to pursue home-schooling unnecessarily. School-based SW can also be said to occur when parents allow a child to stay home because other children in the family have a day off school, and when parent devaluation of education leads them to be uninvested in their child's school attendance. A treatment-based reason might be the sabotage of treatment aimed at reintegrating a child in school ([Kearney, 2004](#)). Accounts of SW in non-Westernized countries emphasize assistance provided at home (e.g., looking after other children; collecting water; [Amatu, 1981](#)) and in the family business (e.g., farm help during busy harvesting seasons; [Obondo & Dhadphale, 1990](#)). An alternative subtyping was based on [Reid's \(2002\)](#) observations of parents: (1) parents who are anti-education, (2) laissez-faire parents who support any actions taken by their child, (3) frustrated parents who

have failed in their efforts to get their child to school, (4) desperate parents who need their children at home to look after them, and (5) vulnerable parents who are young, single, or come from ethnic minority backgrounds. It is likely that Reid's third category comprises parents of SR youth who have lost hope following unsuccessful attempts to help their child attend school.

Birioukov (2016) recently raised concern about the term "parentally condoned absence," and his concern has ramifications for the use of the term SW. First, it is difficult to discern when absences are truly parentally condoned. Second, in some school districts, youth over a certain age do not need parental consent to be absent.

### School Exclusion

We use the term "school exclusion" (SE) to refer to problematic absenteeism that stems from school-based decision-making. School-based decisions that may result in SE revolve around: the use of disciplinary measures; the allocation of resources for students in need; and the need to satisfy school-based performance requirements.

Before considering SE as a type of problematic absenteeism it is important to note that exclusion from school for disciplinary reasons is often regarded as appropriate when applied within guidelines. Disciplinary exclusion may occur permanently (expulsion) or temporarily (suspension), and suspension may occur internally (the student attends school but not regular classes) or externally (the student is removed from school for a specified time; Costenbader & Markson, 1998). It has been argued that disciplinary exclusion is in the best interests of the school community (New South Wales Government, 2015). If it occurs within sanctioned guidelines (e.g., GOV.UK, n.d.; Victoria State Government, 2017) the excluded youth's absence should *not* be regarded as a SAP. According to a report of the UK Children's Commissioner (2012), disciplinary exclusion ought to be a last resort in rare cases and it must be fair and transparent, consider the child's views, involve a quality alternative for the excluded child, and be legal. Illegal permanent expulsion has been identified, suggesting that school staff may lack an understanding of attendance laws or that guidelines related to exclusion may be inadequate (Children's Commissioner, 2013). We propose that absence stemming from disciplinary exclusion that is inappropriate (i.e., outside accepted guidelines; unfair; nontransparent; inconsiderate of the student's needs) be regarded as a SAP in the form of SE.

SE can also be said to occur when absenteeism stems from the school's inability or unwillingness to accommodate a student's special needs. For example, a young person with an intellectual disability, medical illness, or severe social-emotional or behavioral problem may

require extra support (e.g., teacher's aide) to participate in classroom activities. When this support is not (made) available at school, the young person may be asked to stay at home or the parents may be asked to collect their child from school before the end of the school day. Some young people may be discouraged from participating in school camps, excursions, and other school events because their nonparticipation is more convenient for the school (Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, 2012). This may be a form of discrimination that contravenes Article 28 of the Convention of the Rights of the Child, which states that all children have an equal right to education (The United Nations, 1989).

Finally, SE can be said to occur when schools encourage a young person to be absent in order to meet school performance requirements. For example, high-stakes testing policies that reward and punish schools based on mean student test scores create an environment where low-achieving students may be excluded from testing (Hellig & Darling-Hammond, 2008). This practice may be an unintended consequence of operant conditioning used to motivate schools to meet certain benchmarks (Children's Commissioner, 2013).

### Evaluating Two Approaches to Differentiation Between School Attendance Problems

We begin by reviewing current anecdotal and scientific support for a typology of SAPs based on the differentiation between SR, TR, and SW. Thereafter we describe and evaluate a different approach to differentiation, one based upon the function of absenteeism as measured via the SRAS.

#### Anecdotal Support for Differentiation via Type

Many authors use existing criteria to differentiate between SAP types. The distinction between SR and TR is based on the notion that SR involves the following: reluctance or refusal to attend in association with emotional distress (e.g., Bahali, Tahiroglu, Avci, & Seydaoglu, 2011; Carless, Melvin, Tonge, & Newman, 2015; Doobay, 2008; Egger et al., 2003; Havik et al., 2015a; Heyne et al., 2002; Maric, Heyne, MacKinnon, van Widenfelt, & Westenberg, 2013; Martin, Cabrol, Bouvard, Lepine, & Mouren-Simeoni, 1999; Maynard et al., 2015; Nuttall & Woods, 2013); the absence of serious antisocial behavior (e.g., Bernstein et al., 2000; Doobay, 2008; Hella & Bernstein, 2012; Honjo et al., 2001; McShane, Walter, & Rey, 2001; Place, Hulsmeier, Brownrigg, & Soulsby, 2005); and the young person staying at home and/or not concealing their absence from parents (e.g., Hansen, Sanders, Massaro, & Last, 1998; Hughes, Gullone, Dudley, & Tonge, 2010; Kameguchi & Murphy-Shigematsu, 2001; Okuyama, Okada, Kuribayashi, & Kaneko, 1999; Timberlake, 1984; Wu et al., 2013). Differentiation between

SR and SW is often based on parents having made reasonable efforts to enforce school attendance or expressing their commitment to work towards school attendance (e.g., Heyne et al., 2002; Maric, Heyne, de Heus, van Widenfelt, & Westenberg, 2012; McKay-Brown et al., accepted; Melvin et al., 2017).

Anecdotal support for differentiation between SAP types is not confined to its common practice. Authors discussing the heterogeneity inherent in SAPs have argued that there are good theoretical and practical reasons for differentiating between subtypes (Atkinson et al., 1985; Kolvin et al., 1984). In a similar fashion, we argue that differentiation between the main types of SAP can benefit research in the field of absenteeism, aid efficient assessment, and promote effective intervention.

An initial step in understanding SAPs is to determine the scope of the problem. The complex nature of absenteeism argues against a simple analysis of the amount of time youth are absent from school (Keppens & Spruyt, 2017b). By researching absence according to SAP type, information accrues about which types are more common, increasing faster, or responding more poorly to interventions, helping to focus limited resources on the areas of greatest need. Unfortunately, the prevalence of SAPs is often reported for all SAPs combined. For example, Lyon and Cotler (2007) referred to Kearney's (2001) frequently cited prevalence rate of 5% to 28%. They attributed the wide range to ongoing definitional ambiguity, while simultaneously arguing against differentiation between SAPs like SR and TR. In our view the wide prevalence rate occurs because it encompasses all SAP types, even though they vary in prevalence. For example, the lower end of the 5% to 28% range may reflect estimates of SR, which is less common than TR (Berg, 2002; Egger et al., 2003).

Another step in understanding SAPs is to identify profiles of risk and protective factors associated with each type. The mere fact that different terms have been used to describe different SAP types suggests that each type has intrinsic characteristics demanding differentiation (Torrens Salemi & McCormack Brown, 2003). For example, SR as an emotion-based absenteeism may stem from a youth's social anxiety; a youth's leaving school during the day to spend time at the mall (TR) may stem from an unappealing school curriculum; a parent's belief that schooling is not important may mean that the child is allowed to miss school regularly (SW); and ineffective behavior management practices within a school may lead to unnecessarily high rates of suspension (SE). SAP-specific risk and protective factors can be examined in relation to the development and (dis)continuation of different SAP types. For example, a reduction in social anxiety could be examined as a mediator during intervention for SR,

building knowledge of necessary and sufficient conditions for change.

Diversity in the etiology and presentation of SAPs portends assessment of a very broad range of factors, such as social and emotional functioning, academic status, drug use, family functioning, and extenuating circumstances (Kearney & Sims, 1997). It would be cumbersome and unnecessary for practitioners to assess all factors ever associated with SAPs, each time they are presented with a new case. Instead, by making a judgment about SAP type during initial screening, subsequent assessment of factors associated with the youth's SAP could be expedited. For example, if SR is indicated based on parent reports of their child's "total panic" on school mornings and remaining at home rather than going to school, a decision may be made to administer measures of the extent and nature of anxious and depressive symptoms because these symptoms are commonly associated with SR. If screening indicated that the youth had been hiding their nonattendance from parents, which is characteristic of TR, attention could be directed to investigating parental supervision. When referral information indicates SW (e.g., school staff report that the parent of an absent youth fails to return telephone calls and e-mails), it might be helpful to assess parental attitudes towards education. When a parent reports that their child was sent home from school without good reason, which is a potential indicator of SE, it might be helpful to engage with school officials to clarify exclusionary policies and practices. Thus, classification by SAP type is not the end of the process, but the beginning of a fuller assessment process.

The complex mix of reasons for absenteeism suggests that the arbitrary application of interventions is not justified (Galloway, 1980). It is often argued that effective intervention for SAPs begins with accurate identification of the type of SAP pertinent to the case at hand (Burke & Silverman, 1987; Evans, 2000; Maynard et al., 2012; Paccione-Dyszlewski & Contessa-Kislus, 1987; Reid, 2002; Taylor & Adelman, 1990). Different interventions appear to be relevant for different SAP types, in the case of SR vis-à-vis TR (Berg, 1996, 2002; Elliott, 1999; Evans, 2000) and SW vis-à-vis TR (Hiatt, 1915; Keppens & Spruyt, 2017b). Systematic reviews of interventions for SR (Maynard et al., 2015) and TR (Maynard et al., 2013) also point to differences in interventions for these two SAP types (e.g., relaxation training and cognitive therapy for SR; school-based mentoring and attendance monitoring for TR). Differentiating between SAP types is thus likely to support the choice of interventions. While there is no research data to indicate that SR youth benefit more from SR interventions than TR interventions (and vice versa), it is logical that youth benefit most from interventions that target the risk and protective factors characteristic of the SAP type in question. Preventive interventions for SAPs

may also need to vary according to the form of the SAP (Keppens & Spruyt, 2017b).

### Scientific Support for Differentiation via Type

#### *Differing Associations With Internalizing and Externalizing Behavior*

In a summary of research comparing SR youth and TR youth, Kahn and Nursten (1962) noted substantial support for a relationship between SR and neurosis, and between TR and CD. Subsequent studies confirmed the relationship between TR and externalizing behavior (e.g., Berg et al., 1985; Bools et al., 1990; Vaughn et al., 2013) and between SR and internalizing behavior (e.g., Bools et al., 1990; Egger et al., 2003). For example, Bools et al. (1990) found that half of TR youth had CD while none had an emotional disorder, and no SR youth had CD while half had an emotional disorder. Egger et al. (2003) found associations between SR and internalizing behavior (anxiety disorders, somatic complaints, being shy with peers) but not between TR and these behaviors. In Havik et al.'s (2015a) study, internalizing behavior in the form of subjective health complaints (e.g., headache, stomachache, feeling tired) was associated with both SR and TR, but the association with SR was stronger.

The associations just mentioned focus on variables often used to define SR (i.e., emotional upset) and to differentiate it from TR (i.e., absence of antisocial behavior), which could inflate the relationship between SR and internalizing behavior and between TR and externalizing behavior. However, in Egger and colleagues' (2003) study SR was not defined by the absence of antisocial behavior, and only 5% of SR youth were diagnosed with CD compared with 15% of TR youth. When comorbidity was accounted for, CD was significantly associated with TR but not with SR. The relationship between TR and CD will be due, in part, to the fact that one of the 15 criteria for CD is "often truant from school" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 470), but this overlap cannot fully account for the strong relationship between TR and CD. Despite the apparent relationship between TR and externalizing behavior, it is important to keep in mind that youth truanting from school vary in the extent to which they display other externalizing behavior (Maynard et al., 2012).

#### *Differing Associations With Other Variables*

Being bullied or teased and attending a dangerous school were significantly associated with SR but not with TR (Egger et al., 2003). Havik, Bru, and Ertesvåg (2015b) similarly found that victimization to bullying was an important risk factor for SR. It seems that SR youth, more than TR youth, are vulnerable to intimidation and seek refuge at home.

One of the few similarities Egger et al. (2003) found between SR and TR youth was the significant association each had with depressive disorders, sleeping problems, and fatigue. A study by Roeser, Eccles, and Strobel (1998) also revealed a significant, albeit small, association between skipping classes and symptoms of depression, which could be viewed as a relationship between TR and depression. It thus appears that the anxiety-related component of internalizing behavior has a unique relationship with SR while the depression-related component is characteristic of both SR and TR.

Havik et al. (2015a) found a tendency for youth with special educational needs to report more TR-related reasons for nonattendance as opposed to SR-related reasons. This corresponds with the long-standing notion that TR youth are more likely to have educational difficulties (Berg, 1997; Hersov, 1960a). According to Havik et al. (2015a), "feelings of failure in school could push some students toward truancy" (p. 330).

Regarding family factors, an impoverished home environment was significantly associated with TR and not SR (Egger et al., 2003) and mental health treatment was more likely among the parents of SR youth relative to the parents of TR youth (Bools et al., 1990; Egger et al., 2003). Lax parental supervision was significantly associated with TR and not SR (Egger et al., 2003), and lower parental monitoring of absence was reported by TR youth relative to SR youth (Havik et al., 2015b). A parent's lax supervision of their child's behavior may account for a truanting youth's efforts and success in hiding nonattendance.

A difference between SR and SW was suggested by a small study of primary school children. Parents reported higher levels of avoidance of school stimuli that provoke negative affect among children in cases classified as SR relative to cases classified as SW (Vuijk, Heyne, and van Efferen-Wiersma, 2010).

#### *Component, Cluster, and Confirmatory Factor Analyses*

Berg et al. (1978) conducted a principal component analysis to determine the extent to which youth who failed to attend school represented a homogeneous group. Four categories were found: (1) a SR-related factor labeled "social isolation or school refusal"; (2) a factor held to represent SW, labeled "social disadvantage and parental complicity"; (3) a factor held to represent TR, labeled "educational and behavior problems"; and (4) a factor labeled "conduct disturbances." There was overlap between the categories, but the data was not best represented by one general factor of absenteeism. The SW and SR factors were negatively associated with conduct problems, underscoring differentiation from TR. In a subsequent study of youth taken to court due to nonattendance, principal component analysis yielded components reflecting TR and SR (Berg et al., 1985). The component scores

were distributed categorically rather than dimensionally, meaning that “individuals either have or do not have school refusal or truancy, and it is not a question of how much of each characteristic any child has” (p. 163). There was a high degree of correspondence between classifications conducted by child psychiatrists and the classification of TR or SR based on component scores, providing support for the validity of the differentiation.

Bools and colleagues (1990) conducted a cluster analysis based on youth taken to a school attendance committee. One cluster contained the majority of SR youth and no TR youth; a second cluster contained TR youth displaying severe antisocial behavior, and no SR youth; and a third cluster contained mostly TR youth with no severe antisocial behavior. The clusters differed with respect to morning symptoms (e.g., reluctance, tears) and the highest level of these symptoms was observed among SR youth, corresponding with the notion that SR entails emotional upset about school attendance. Knollmann, Reissner, Kiessling, and Hebebrand (2013) investigated differential classification among “school-avoiding” youth from an outpatient clinic. Cluster analysis yielded three groups: (1) “school refusers,” who had low externalizing symptoms and mainly stayed at home with their parents; (2) “truants,” who had high externalizing symptoms, spent time away from home when not at school, and whose parents were initially unaware of the absenteeism; and (3) “school avoidance with mixed symptoms,” comprising youth who were at home alone during the day and whose parents usually knew about the absence, perhaps reflective of SW. Youth in the third group had higher externalizing symptoms than those in the SR group, and lower than those in the TR group. Cluster formation was not influenced by internalizing symptoms, but the TR group had lower rates relative to the other two groups.

Havik et al. (2015a) studied reasons for school nonattendance using the self-reports of over 3,600 youth who were absent from school at least once in the preceding three months. Confirmatory factor analysis supported four reasons for nonattendance: (1) “somatic symptoms” (e.g., fever); (2) “subjective health complaints” (e.g., felt unwell); (3) “truancy” (e.g., went to do more appealing activities outside of school); and (4) “school refusal” (e.g., afraid or worried about something at school). There was a relatively strong correlation between SR and TR. This might be explained by the fact that the majority of youth had fewer than 5 absent days in 3 months, suggesting the presence of emerging SAPs rather than established SAPs. When attendance problems are emerging, the unique features of established SAPs may be less salient. Another explanation for the correlation between SR and TR is found in the items used. A common criterion for defining TR (concealing nonattendance) was missing,

as was a common criterion for defining SR (at home with parents’ knowledge).

#### *Comprehensiveness and Specificity*

A central shortcoming of classification systems for absenteeism is that “any clear set of defining criteria would appear to exclude some children who in all other respects would be considered to be suffering from school phobia” (Berg, 2002, p. 1261). A young person may display all the defining features of SR except that his parents have not made a reasonable effort to get him to school. Strict adherence to criteria that are not comprehensive enough to account for this case would prohibit the classification of SR. Another challenge during classification occurs when youth display characteristics of more than one category, either at a point in time or across time. Galloway (1980) noted that, per case, absentee youth and their parents endorsed numerous reasons for absenteeism. This suggested to Galloway that categories “over-simplify the true position” (p. 159). It should be noted, however, that some of the SAP categories employed by Galloway were vaguely defined and the Berg et al. (1969) criteria for classifying SR were not used.

Lyon and Cotler (2007) presented a case for abandoning the idea that SR and TR are different SAP types, arguing that the division is “artificial and impractical” (p. 551) and the two categories are “neither comprehensive nor exhaustive and overlap considerably” (p. 559). Close consideration of the studies they reviewed invites a different conclusion. First, based on Berg et al.’s (1993) study, which indicated that 14 of 80 youth with SAPs (18%) could not be classified as TR youth or SR youth, they claimed that definitions of TR and SR are unable to capture all youth with SAPs. They did not consider the possibility that these 14 youth fulfilled criteria for SW, a SAP type not investigated in Berg and colleagues’ study. Second, referring to Bools and colleagues’ (1990) study, they stated that a significant number of youth were classified as both SR and TR youth ( $n = 9$ ) or as neither ( $n = 14$ ). The proportion classified as both SR and TR was 9%. Regarding the “neither” group, Lyon and Cotler (2007) did not acknowledge Bools and colleagues’ (1990) suggestion that these youth might be classified as SW cases. Third, drawing on data from Egger et al. (2003), Lyon and Cotler stated that “one full quarter” of those classified as pure anxious SR youth were also classifiable as TR youth (p. 553). Our examination of the study indicates that youth with both SR and TR represented 5% of youth with a SAP; 75% of youth with a SAP were classified as TR only and 20% as SR only. Egger et al. (2003) stated that SR and TR are “distinct but not mutually exclusive” (p. 797, emphasis added). Lyon and Cotler (2007) appear to have been overly focused on the lack of mutual exclusivity.

Among youth with a SAP, the overlap between SR and TR is observed to be 5% (Berg et al., 1993; Egger et al.,

2003), 9% (Bools et al., 1990), or 17% (Berg et al., 1985). It seems that the clear majority of youth with a SAP (i.e., between 83% and 95%) can be reliably classified as displaying SR *or* TR (or SW), rather than both SR *and* TR.

### Differentiation via the SRAS

At the start of the 1990s Kearney and Silverman (1990) introduced a new model for conceptualizing SAPs: the functional analytic model of school refusal behavior. It is sometimes presented as an alternative to differentiating between SAP types (e.g., Kearney & Albano, 2004). It could also be regarded as a complementary approach, whereby the SAP typology and functional analytic model both contribute to our understanding of differences between youth with SAPs.

#### *Emergence*

Burke and Silverman (1987) emphasized the need for a rigorous system to determine treatment-relevant differences among youth with SAPs. Kearney and Silverman (1990) then proposed a functional analytic model comprising four hypothesized reasons for the maintenance of a youth's SAP: (1) avoidance of school-related stimuli that provoke a sense of general negative affectivity, (2) escape from aversive social and/or evaluative situations at school, (3) pursuit of attention from significant others, and (4) pursuit of tangible reinforcement outside of the school setting. These reasons—also called functional conditions—were based on clinical observation of youths' responses to interventions that targeted different behaviors (Kearney & Silverman, 1993). The 16-item School Refusal Assessment Scale (SRAS; Kearney & Silverman, 1993) embodied the functional analytic model. Various studies pointed to problems with the instrument's construct and concurrent validity (see Heyne, Vreeke, Maric, Boelens, & van Widenfelt, 2017). Kearney (2002b) modified the 16 items to varying degrees and added 8 new items. The 24 items of the revised instrument (SRAS-R) are divided across the four functional conditions. Each condition is linked with a unique set of cognitive-behavioral treatment recommendations (Kearney, 2008b; Kearney & Albano, 2007a, 2007b).

The SRAS<sup>4</sup> model is becoming increasingly prominent outside of the U.S. where it was developed. It has been employed or evaluated among German (Overmeyer, Schmidt, & Blanz, 1994; Walter, von Bialy, von Wirth, & Doepfner, 2017), French (Brandibas, Jeunier, Gaspard, & Fourasté, 2001), Italian (Rigante & Patrizi, 2007), Korean (Geum-Woon, 2010), UK (Richards & Hadwin, 2011), Turkish (Seçer, 2014), Spanish (González et al., 2016),

Dutch (Heyne et al., 2017), and Chilean (González et al., 2017) youth. Inglés, González, García-Fernández, Vicent, and Martínez-Monteagudo (2015) claimed that the SRAS approach to categorizing SAPs is the most consolidated in the field, although the claim was unsupported.

#### *Purported Benefits*

Perhaps the most promising aspect of the SRAS approach to differentiation is that it links SRAS functional conditions with cognitive-behavioral treatments targeting different reasons for SAPs. Differentiation is not based on psychiatric diagnoses, so differential treatment can be applied without relying on a classification system like the DSM. In some respects, this would appear to be beneficial. First, approximately one-third of SAP cases do not present with a DSM disorder, and when they do, comorbidity is common (Kearney & Albano, 2004). Second, some authors regard the link between DSM disorders and different SAP types as simplistic and unhelpful. For example, Lauchlan (2003) wrote of the “rather unsophisticated distinction of school refusal (linked to separation anxiety) and truancy (linked to conduct disorder)” (p. 135). Lyon and Cotler (2007) referred to the habit of relying on “stereotyped assumptions about anxiety or conduct disorders” when applying treatments for SAPs (p. 562). It has even been argued that because SR youth do not always display disorder-level anxiety, and TR youth do not always meet criteria for CD, the distinction between SR and TR should be abandoned (Lauchlan, 2003; Pellegrini, 2007). The unfortunate implication is that practitioners simply rely on DSM diagnoses to classify and treat SAPs (i.e., SR is classified and treated based on the presence of separation anxiety; TR is classified and treated based on the presence of CD). However, there are many interventions for TR which are not based on diagnoses (Maynard et al., 2013). Similarly, manuals for the treatment of SR advocate the use of case formulation when planning intervention (Heyne et al., 2015), which refutes the notion that simplistic links are made between DSM diagnoses and treatment.

The value of the functional analytic model is suggested by Kearney and Albano's (2004) call for the assessment of both the form *and* function of SAPs. Kearney (2007) reiterated the need to assess the function of SAPs based on data showing that measures of the form of internalizing behavior were not related to absenteeism while the SRAS functional conditions were. It is possible that the functional conditions were better predictors of absenteeism because numerous SRAS items refer to contextual factors related to absenteeism (e.g., school, family, and peers) whereas items in measures of internalizing behavior may not refer to these contextual factors. In any case, it remains to be seen whether the capacity of the SRAS functional conditions to predict absenteeism

<sup>4</sup>We use the SRAS acronym to refer to both the original SRAS and the revised version, the SRAS-R.

has any meaningful relation to treatment outcome. If not, then the capacity of the SRAS to predict absenteeism is not necessarily a strong argument in favor of differentiating between SAPs based on function.

Another argument for the SRAS approach to differentiation is that the form of the behavior of many youth with SAPs changes from one day to the next while the underlying reason for nonattendance remains consistent (Kearney, 2007). Based on clinical observation, Kearney (2007) suggested that the young person who skips school one day may be slow to get to school the next day. However, empirical studies are yet to support the notion that youth who display TR characteristics on one day will display SR characteristics on another day. If this was found to be the case it would not necessarily be problematic for differentiation according to SAP types. It may merely reflect the existence of a small group of youth displaying characteristics of more than one SAP. It is also feasible that the function of a SAP changes over time. Currently it is unknown whether the function of a SAP is more or less stable than its form.

#### *Shortcomings*

The four-factor model of SAPs embodied in the SRAS is not consistently supported by research. This is described in Heyne and colleagues' (2017) review and evidenced in a recent study yielding three factors (Knollmann, Sicking, Hebebrand, & Reissner, 2017). Two other recent studies yielded three- and four-factor models. In the first of these, González et al. (2016) found that the three-factor model was the best fit. In the second, Walter et al. (2017) found that the three-factor model applied to parent data while the four-factor model applied to youth data. Classification via the functional analytic model may thus be limited to three functions associated with SAPs, calling into question the relevance of the four corresponding interventions.

Kearney (2003) suggested that the functional conditions "cover all youths with this problem" (p. 60). However, some youth who present with a SAP score very low on all four functional conditions (Dube & Orpinas, 2009), indicating that important factors associated with SAPs are not assessed via the SRAS. In the construction of the SRAS, factors may have been overlooked because the instrument was modeled after Durand and Crimmins' (1988) classification of self-injury behavior and not based on studies of SAP factors. Proactive and reactive motivations for avoiding school warrant assessment (Taylor & Adelman, 1990). While some proactive motivations are addressed via SRAS items (e.g., preferring to spend time with a parent or with peers), reactive motivations are not (e.g., protesting against school rules). Other factors associated with SAPs but missing from the SRAS are found in studies published since the development of the SRAS. These factors include subjective health complaints

(Havik et al., 2015a), being bullied (Havik et al., 2015b), sleeping problems (Egger et al., 2003), academic difficulties (Maynard et al., 2012), thoughts of personal failure (Maric et al., 2012), teacher support (Havik et al., 2015b), and parental management of the child's behavior (Egger et al., 2003).

Because the SRAS was developed to assess the functions of child-motivated SAPs, it does not assess factors associated with SW and SE. Factors that may be relevant in the assessment of SW (failure to enroll a student in school) and SE (teacher strikes) were signaled by Evans (2000). The SRAS also fails to distinguish between distant and recent antecedents despite the suggestion that both are important in the assessment of SAPs (Evans, 2000).

The SRAS item set is problematic in several other ways. First, some SRAS items seem to measure overall anxiety as opposed to the functional aspects of refusal to attend school (Knollmann et al., 2017). Indeed, functional conditions of the SRAS are often found to be associated with measures of anxiety (Heyne et al., 2017), calling into question the extent to which SRAS items measure the function versus the form of SAPs. Second, authors point to the complex or ambiguous wording of many of the items added to the SRAS to form the SRAS-R (González et al., 2016; Heyne et al., 2017; Knollmann et al., 2017). We also noted a small but potentially important change in item wording, signaling a shift away from a common truancy-related construct ("skip school" in the SRAS) to an alternative construct ("refuse school" in the SRAS-R). Third, some authors make a conceptual link between truancy and the SRAS items in the "pursuit of tangible reinforcement" functional condition (González et al., 2016; Kearney, 2008c; Kearney & Silverman, 1993). This practice does not signal a problem with the items in that functional condition, but because those items are focused on just one aspect of truancy (i.e., seeking pleasure outside of school), the practice oversimplifies the complex nature of TR (see Maynard et al., 2012).

Limited parent-youth agreement has been reported for the SRAS (Higa, Daleiden, & Chorpita, 2002) and SRAS-R (Tolin et al., 2009). This mirrors the low interrater agreement found for the instrument after which the SRAS was modeled (Higa et al., 2002). Asynchrony between respondents does not necessarily render the SRAS-R problematic, and it can even benefit clinical discussion of cases (Tolin et al., 2009). However, the classification of SAPs according to SRAS functional conditions remains tenuous for as long as there is limited evidence to support the custom of combining unweighted scores from parents and youth (Higa et al., 2002).

The simplicity of the SRAS (i.e., 24 items measuring four functions) may make it an alluring tool for planning intervention. However, it may also contribute to overly simplistic interventions. For example, parent involvement

is not emphasized when functional conditions 1 or 2 are prominent (Kearney & Albano, 2007b). The absence of parent involvement may be appropriate for simpler cases in which anxiety is the only factor maintaining the problem. Many cases are more complex and the plans for intervention need to be based on a broader assessment of the presenting SAP (Kearney, 2001, 2006a; Kearney & Albano, 2004). Carroll (2015) even suggested that the SRAS model is inherently constrained because intervention is predetermined; it is limited to four interventions linked to the four functional conditions. There is currently no scientific support for the notion that the four interventions corresponding with the four functional conditions span the needs of all youth with child-motivated SAPs. It should also be noted that support for the treatment utility of the SRAS is based on case studies and a small nonrandomized controlled study, whereas large-scale studies are yet to be conducted (Heyne et al., 2017).

#### *Further Considerations for Use of the SRAS*

It is not uncommon for youth to have high scores on multiple SRAS functional conditions, as evidenced in case studies (e.g., Kearney, 2002a; Kearney, Pursell, & Alvarez, 2001; Tolin et al., 2009) and studies based on larger samples (Dube & Orpinas, 2009; Kearney & Albano, 2004). When the highest scoring functional conditions differ by less than 0.5 points on the 0-to-6 scale the young person is said to have a mixed functional profile (Kearney & Silverman, 1999) or multifunction school refusal behavior (Kearney, 2002a). The 0.5 criterion was selected somewhat arbitrarily (Kearney & Silverman, 1999) and if it were larger (e.g., 1 or 2 point difference between the highest scoring conditions) then the extent of overlap among SRAS functional conditions would increase considerably. When overlap is observed, whether it is in a mixed functional profile based on the SRAS or in the classification of multiple SAP types (e.g., a youth displays characteristics of SR and TR), it may point to problems with the classification system. Alternatively, it may indicate that multiple contributing factors and presentations are associated with a youth's SAP. When this occurs, the practitioner's case formulation and plan for intervention need to account for co-occurrence among SRAS functions and/or SAP types.

We advise against overreliance on the SRAS to understand a youth's SAP and plan intervention, as does the author of the SRAS (Kearney, 2001, 2006a; Kearney & Albano, 2004). As noted, the SRAS was developed to assess just four functions of a SAP. All of these are essentially focused on the young person (i.e., avoidance of negative affectivity or social/evaluative situations; pursuit of attention or tangible reinforcement). Broader factors that may be associated with the maintenance of SAPs

(e.g., lax parental supervision in the case of TR; parent psychopathology in the case of SR) are not addressed via the model. Furthermore, SW and SE are not covered in the model, so factors such as parent desire for support at home and inadequate school resources for accommodating youth with special needs are not assessed. A wide range of methods and instruments are warranted to assess predisposing, precipitating, perpetuating, and protective factors associated with SAPs. These include questionnaires but also school consultation, review of the attendance record, observations, and interviews with the young person and parents, individually and together (Heyne & Sauter, 2013; Kearney, 2003).

## **Discussion**

Assuming that differentiation between SAP types has value for the field, it is essential to have shared definitions of SR, TR, SW, and SE. Definitions are "the first step in facilitating better comparisons among schools and states, researchers and authors, and statistical reporting" (Gentle-Genitty et al., 2015, 63). More specifically, when consistent definitions are used across intervention studies we stand to gain a better understanding of which interventions work for which specific types of SAP (Fantuzzo et al., 2005). Based on the foregoing review, we propose nuanced definitions of the four SAP types as a platform for commentary and further refinement. We also offer suggestions for the use of terminology. Thereafter we provide practical considerations for the process of classifying SAPs by type.

### **Conceptual Considerations**

#### *Defining School Refusal*

As noted, SR is often conceptualized according to Berg's (2002) criteria. To account for critical commentary on these criteria we propose the following, more nuanced criteria. "School refusal is said to occur when: (1) a young person is reluctant or refuses to attend school, in conjunction with emotional distress that is temporal and indicative of aversion to attendance (e.g., excessive fearfulness, temper tantrums, unhappiness, unexplained physical symptoms) or emotional distress that is chronic and hindering attendance (e.g., depressive affect; sleep problems), usually but not necessarily manifest in absence (e.g., late arrivals; missing whole school days; missing consecutive weeks, months, or years); and (2) the young person does not try to hide associated absence from their parents (e.g., they are at home and the parents are aware of this), and if they previously hid absence then they stopped doing so once the absence was discovered; and (3) the young person does not display severe antisocial behavior, beyond resistance to parental attempts to get them to school; and (4) the parents have made reasonable efforts, currently or at an earlier stage in the history of the problem, to secure attendance at school, and/or the parents express

their intention for their child to attend school full-time. When Kearney's (2008a) criteria for problematic absenteeism are met alongside these criteria, the classification is SR. If Kearney's criteria are not met, the classification is emerging SR.

Criterion 1 warrants two remarks. First, signs of aversion towards attendance may not be observed if, on a given day, the parents do not attempt to get their child to attend. Second, youth may attend school but be absent from the classroom (e.g., frequent visits to the school counsellor to avoid a specific class) or remain in the classroom while experiencing emotional distress. In these cases, Criterion 1 would still be met. Thus, Jones and Suveg's (2015) distinction between "school reluctant youth" (youth nervous or scared about attending school but still attending) and SR youth (anxious youth who miss school) is disregarded. We consider SR to be applicable to youth who have difficulty attending school, whether or not they actually miss school. This is in keeping with Berg and colleagues' (1969) original criteria for SR.

Regarding the fourth criterion, recall the suggestion by Bools and colleagues (1990) that the classification of SAPs is difficult because of the need to determine whether parents have put enough pressure on the child to go to school. "Reasonable parental efforts" could thus be operationalized as repeated attempts to address the problem, beyond the parent simply expressing to the child their desire that the child attend school. These efforts could include getting the child out of bed or into a mode of transport to go to school, contacting school staff because of nonattendance, and attending meetings aimed at addressing the problem. We acknowledge that in families with two parents, the parents may vary in their efforts to get their child to school, perhaps because of differences in parenting style or self-efficacy.

#### *Defining Truancy*

As noted, TR has narrow and broad meanings (Berg, 1997). To facilitate the differentiation of SAPs by type we argue for the use of a narrow definition as follows: "Truancy is said to occur when: (1) a young person is absent from school for a whole day or part of the day, or they are at school but absent from the proper location (e.g., in the school-yard rather than in class); and (2) the absence occurs without the permission of school authorities; and (3) the young person typically tries to conceal the absence from their parents." When Kearney's (2008a) criteria for problematic absenteeism are met alongside these criteria, the classification is TR. If Kearney's criteria are not met, the classification is emerging TR.

Regarding the first criterion, we refrained from using expressions such as "skipping" school or class. Different colloquialisms are used in different countries (e.g., "wagging," "cutting," "mitching"), colloquialisms are likely

to change over time, they may not be easily translatable in other languages, and they are open to wide interpretation. We also excluded reference to the young person "being away from home when not at school," because some youth may succeed in hiding their absence while at home (e.g., they are only at home when their parents are at work). It is acknowledged, however, that many truanting youth are not at home when they are not at school. The second and third criteria allow for the possibility that school staff or parents have identified the youth's efforts to hide their absence. This is more likely to occur when schools have good systems for registering and responding to absenteeism.

#### *Defining School Withdrawal*

The many characterizations of SW require synthesis to achieve a standardized definition. SW has been characterized according to the reasons for keeping a child at home (e.g., family-based versus school-based reasons). These reasons likely represent sub-types of the overarching classification of SW and need not be included in the definition of SW. SW has also been characterized by the parents' influence on absence, ranging from opposition towards sending the child to school (e.g., deliberately keeping a child at home; willful), through ambivalence about managing attendance (e.g., laissez-faire; lack of interest in child's education; irresponsibility), to inability to get the child to attend school. A parent may thus exert effort to keep the child at home or exert little or no effort to get the child to school. The "inability" aspect is not unique to SW. It overlaps with the inability that a parent of a young person displaying SR might have in getting their child to attend school. It is also important to note that some parents who want their child to attend school may be unable to manage their child's attendance because the family is "stretched to the limit" because of medical, social, or financial problems (Galloway, 1982, p. 328). A parent's and child's inability to jointly accept social obligations is different from deliberate withholding of a child from school (Kahn & Nursten, 1962), but these cases could still be identified as SW, with the specifier "withdrawal is predominantly unintentional."

We thus propose the following definition: "School withdrawal is said to occur when a young person's absence from school (e.g., late arrivals; missing whole school days; missing consecutive weeks, months, or years) is: (1) not concealed from the parent(s); and (2) attributable to parental effort to keep the young person at home, or attributable to there being little or no parental effort to get the young person to school." When Kearney's (2008a) criteria for problematic absenteeism are met alongside these criteria, the classification is SW. If Kearney's criteria are not met, the classification is emerging SW. A specification of "withdrawal is predominantly intentional" or "withdrawal is predominantly unintentional" can be added. If the young

person does not live with their parent(s), the withdrawal from school may be ascribed to guardians or, in the case of homeless youth, to the community.

#### *Defining School Exclusion*

We propose that SE as a SAP type be defined as follows: *“School exclusion is said to occur when a young person is absent from school or specific school activities, for any period of time, caused by the school: (1) employing disciplinary exclusion in an inappropriate manner (e.g., unlawful expulsion; internal suspension for the school’s convenience); or (2) being unable or unwilling to accommodate the physical, social-emotional, behavioral, or academic needs of the young person (e.g., parents of a student with a mild intellectual disability are told to pick their daughter up two afternoons per week because her teaching aide will not be available); or (3) discouraging a young person from attending, beyond the realm of legally acceptable school policy (e.g., a youth who is struggling academically is asked to spend the day at home on the day that national academic assessments are undertaken).* The lawful use of suspension and expulsion would thus fall outside the realm of SE. In view of the negative outcomes associated with disciplinary exclusion, and the impact that exclusion from activities such as school excursions may have upon a young person with special needs, any amount of absence due to SE could be regarded as problematic. Thus, [Kearney’s \(2008a\)](#) criteria for first differentiating between nonproblematic and problematic absenteeism would not need to apply.

We note that disciplinary exclusion deemed to be sanctioned may still be a concerning practice because it can be used excessively with vulnerable students. For example, suspension is used disproportionately among minority groups ([Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003](#)) and those from socio-economically disadvantaged areas ([Hemphill et al., 2010](#)). Negative outcomes of disciplinary exclusion include high rates of dropout from school ([Arcia, 2006](#); [Johnston, 1989](#)) and involvement with the legal system ([Costenbader & Markson, 1998](#)). A recent UK report indicated a bi-directional relationship between disciplinary exclusion (expulsion or suspension) and psychopathology ([Ford et al., 2017](#)).

#### *Using Terminology*

Some authors are concerned that terms like SR and TR suggest that the problem lies in the child, and that SW means that the attendance problem lies simply with the parents ([Carroll, 2010](#); [Gregory & Purcell, 2014](#); [Pellegrini, 2007](#)). Care always needs to be taken not to label students experiencing a SAP ([Gentle-Genitty et al., 2015](#)), not to regard SW as bad parenting, and not to castigate schools when SE is identified. We propose that the terms SR, TR, SW, and SE be used to characterize the nature of the SAP (i.e., refusing in the case of SR, concealing or absconding in the case of TR, withdrawing in the case of SW, and excluding in the case of SE) and not the people associated with them. For

this reason, the proposed definitions begin with: “[SAP type] is said to occur when ...”

[Carroll \(2010\)](#) argued that the more general term “pupil absenteeism” is advantageous because it does not carry connotations about where the problem lies. However, using more general terms such as “pupil absenteeism” and “chronic nonattendance” is an ineffective solution. These terms undermine the value of differentiation and may lead to a loss of helpful information when conducting assessment, planning intervention, doing research, and communicating about SAPs. By analogy, the fact that the term “depression” might be misinterpreted to mean that the cause of a youth’s depression resides in the young person does not negate the value of differentiating between depression and anxiety.

Using the term “child-motivated attendance problem” to refer collectively to SR and TR is concerning because, on the face of it, it discounts the role of family, school, and community factors in SR and TR ([Heyne, Sauter, Ollendick, van Widenfelt, & Westenberg, 2014](#)). Using the term “school refusal behavior” to refer to so-called child-motivated SAPs also seems unhelpful. It ignores the differences identified between SR and TR, and as noted above, it is used interchangeably with SR even though SR and school refusal behavior are different constructs.

The term TR has a particularly negative connotation for some because it has been associated with delinquency ([Gentle-Genitty et al., 2015](#)) and may foster a punitive approach to intervention ([Lyon & Cotler, 2007](#)). However, a review of indicated interventions for TR revealed that court-based interventions are uncommon and that nonpunitive school-based interventions for TR often include mentor relationships with teachers, peer support and tutoring, the provision of praise and preferred reinforcements, and focusing on the individual needs of students in small group settings ([Maynard et al., 2013](#)).

Given the large number of SAP terms proffered in the literature, it may be unproductive at this point to propose alternatives, despite calls to abandon terms such as SR (e.g., [Reid, 2014](#)) and TR (e.g., [Birioukov, 2016](#)). The current terms seem to have gained familiarity and utility among a range of authors. If a change of terminology is deemed necessary, TR might be termed “school absconding” so it characterizes the nature of the SAP and brings an end to the confusion that has arisen from narrow and broad definitions of TR. The uniformity this would offer across SAP terms (school refusal, school absconding, school withdrawal, school exclusion) may have some appeal. [Birioukov’s](#) suggestion that “voluntary absenteeism” replace the term TR would be problematic because he was referring to the broader definition of TR. Finally, the recent trend of referring to SR as “school avoidance” blurs distinctions between SR and TR, given that TR is also a form of avoiding school.

## Practical Considerations

### *Tips for Differentiating Between School Refusal and Truancy*

There is reasonably good consensus on the differences between SR and TR (Berecz, 1968) and differentiation is generally regarded as easy (Berg et al., 1969). Nonetheless, various issues warrant consideration. First, Kearney (2002b) criticized the notion that TR is characterized by a parent's lack of knowledge of the child's absence because the situation no longer applies when the family enters treatment to address the problem. In our opinion, the TR youth's initial behavior—concealing nonattendance—is characteristically different from the behavior of the SR youth who typically stays at home when not at school, with full awareness of the parents. In some cases, differentiation between SR and TR may be complicated by the questionable accuracy of the parent's knowledge about the child's whereabouts (Bools et al., 1990). Additional information from school staff and youth could be needed.

Second, there are reports of SR youth occasionally concealing nonattendance from their parents. For example, Partridge (1939) reported that one of 10 "psychoneurotic truants" (akin to SR) truanted from home, but very seldom. Berg et al. (1969) noted that some SR youth were absent from school without their parents' knowledge, usually for 1 or 2 days, and attempts to conceal nonattendance were abandoned once nonattendance had been discovered. Werry (1996) cited examples of SR adolescents going to friends' houses or hiding until the parents had gone to work, and he suggested that in some SR cases more time may be needed to detect the absence. Based on this, Elliott (1999) argued that parent knowledge of the absence is not essential for classifying SR, even though this criterion is often used to differentiate between SR and TR. The practitioner charged with differentiation would need to weigh up the extent of concealed absence among youth meeting other SR criteria, to determine whether concurrent classifications of SR and TR are warranted.

Third, attention is sometimes drawn to different patterns of absenteeism associated with SR and TR. Millar (1961) noted that "the absence of the truant tends to be intermittent and for short intervals of a day or so, whereas, the school-refusing child absents himself for days, weeks, or even months at a time" (p. 398). This distinction is not represented in the SR criteria provided by Berg (2002), but it can be held in mind when differentiating between SR and TR. It would be incorrect, however, to assume that SR youth are never sporadically absent from school. SR youth may experience emotional upset about having to attend a particular class that only falls on a certain day of the week.

Fourth, a distinction is sometimes made between SR and TR based on level of interest in school. Partridge (1939) reported that all of the psychoneurotic truants (i.e., SR youth) seemed to like their schools, in contrast to

the typical truant. Morgan (1959) observed that TR youth dislike school rather than fearing school whereas SR youth are unlikely to be indifferent to school. Elliott and Place (2012) noted that TR youth prefer not to attend whereas SR youth may want to attend school but find it too difficult. They suggested that a distinction between TR and SR revolves, to some extent, around volition. Indeed, Havik et al. (2015a) conceptualized TR as a form of nonattendance characterized by "poor motivation for school or a negative attitude toward school" (p. 318). In our view, SR youth afraid of attending school may also dislike school. Furthermore, youth in Maynard and colleagues' (2012) "achievers" subgroup of TR youth may like school. Practitioners should thus avoid classifying based on the youth's attitude to school, but be aware that disinterest in school may signal the possibility of TR. The TR youth's preference for more appealing activities outside of school (Elliott, 1999; Havik et al., 2015a; Kearney, 2008c) may well stem from the lack of interest in schoolwork, which is likely associated with the educational difficulties frequently associated with TR.

Fifth, both SR and TR have been associated with externalizing behavior. SR is usually associated with milder forms such as argumentativeness and aggression when parents try to get the child to school (e.g., Berg, 2002; Hoshino et al., 1987) whereas TR is more commonly associated with severe antisocial behavior in the form of CD (Egger et al., 2003). Defiance of school authority has been associated with TR (Elliott, 1999) and with some SR cases in which the neurotic drive towards independence manifested as a temporary rebellion against external control and authority (Rubenstein & Hastings, 1980). In neither case is the defiance of school authority a defining criterion.

### *Tips for Differentiating Between School Refusal and School Withdrawal*

There are numerous accounts of youth who display SR characteristics (e.g., emotionally upset about going to school) and whose parents show some ambivalence towards their child attending school. According to Morgan (1959), the overprotective mother of a school-refusing youth "readily 'identified' with the child and protected him against authority or condoned his absence," openly or unconsciously colluding with the absence (p. 222). Agras (1959) wrote about the various maneuvers that the mothers of SR youth engage in to keep their child out of school, shielding them from painful experiences. According to Davidson (1960), although it appears at first that it is the mother of the SR youth who tries to persuade her child to go to school while the child refuses, it becomes apparent that the mother often "unconsciously prevents the child from returning" (p. 281). She may focus on the likelihood that

a return to school will fail, which serves as a powerful discouragement for the child to attempt to return to school. Atkinson et al. (1985) summarized psychoanalytic accounts of SR which underscored the parents' role in absenteeism, noting that the mother in a poor marriage is dependent on the child for emotional support. Such dependence may be linked to an ambivalence about the child attending school. Christogiorgos and Giannakopoulos (2014) described the case of 12-year-old Peter who presented with SR and whose mother suffered from agoraphobia. The mother "ardently desired that her son return to school" but she also described the period when he was at home with her as "one of the happiest periods in her life" (p. 184).

These accounts point to the difficulty in differentiating between SR and SW in some cases. At the same time, Berg (2002) suggested that the irresponsible permissiveness associated with SW is different from the overprotectiveness of parents of SR youth who are afraid of pressuring their child too much. In the former case, the parent's motivation would seem to be different (e.g., to enjoy the child's company through the day). But to add complexity, the parents of youth fulfilling SR criteria may also enjoy the child's company through the day, as evidenced in the case of 12-year-old Peter (Christogiorgos & Giannakopoulos, 2014). In Peter's case, however, there was no indication that Peter's mother kept him at home *because* she enjoyed him being there, suggesting a differential classification of SR. Her expressed intention that Peter attends school is also in keeping with our fourth criterion for SR.

In cases where the criteria for SR are fulfilled, the classification of co-occurring SW may be considered if the practitioner judges that parental concern about the child's emotional distress is not the reason that the parent keeps their child at home or makes little or no effort to get them to go to school. In these cases, other factors account for the parent's withdrawal of the child (e.g., helping out at home). In all SW cases (i.e., irrespective of the co-occurrence of SR), the youth's presence at home may fulfil some benefit(s) for the parent(s) or family, either overt (e.g., helping out at home) or covert (e.g., a parent is freed from the social obligation of securing their child's attendance at school).

What about cases in which parents express the intention for their child to attend school but show behavior inconsistent with this? This might occur in chronic cases of SR; the parents appear not to be interested in their child's attendance but in fact they have begrudgingly given up their failed attempts to get their child to school (Galloway, 1985). Different strategies can help ascertain the authenticity of parents' expressed intent for their child to attend school. Martin et al. (1999) suggested that the parents and child need to indicate that they are "convinced of the necessity of school attendance" for

classification of SR (p. 916). Evans (2000) recommended interviewing parents to assess their need for the child to be at home, which may elicit information suggestive of SW. Evans also recommended assessing parents' ability to detect a child's exaggerated symptoms. A parent's inability to do this may signal indifference to exaggerated symptoms which may be more indicative of SW. In our assessments we pay close attention to the parents' past and current efforts to help their child attend school (e.g., history of seeking assistance; fulfilling appointments to discuss the problem). We also explore their current thoughts about the value of their child attending school full-time. The School Refusal Interview for Parents (Heyne & Rollings, 2002) and the Self-Statement Assessment-Parent Form (Heyne & Rollings, 2002) help elicit information to establish the extent of a parent's intent for the child to attend school.

Two other situations warrant consideration. First, if a young person fulfilling the criteria for SR is allowed to stay at home because he wants to care for a parent, then the additional classification of SW may be warranted. However, if he is at home because he is worried about a parent's well-being, and the parent's intention is for the child to attend school, SR alone may be the most fitting classification. Second, when a parent allows an anxious child to stay at home to give them "a break" or a "mental health day," this could be classified as SW when the amount of nonattendance also fulfils Kearney's (2008a) criteria for problematic absenteeism. A co-occurring classification of SR may also be warranted.

#### *Tips for Differentiating Between Truancy and School Withdrawal*

In some SW cases youth were identified as having CD and thus resembling TR cases (Bools et al., 1990). It was suggested that the only difference between the SW youth with CD and the TR youth was that the parents of the SW youth "presumably had little control over them and did not insist that they leave the house on school mornings" (p. 179). The implication that parents of TR youth put pressure on their children to attend school has never been specified as a criterion for TR. When differentiating between TR and SW the practitioner might focus on the TR criterion related to the young person concealing their absence, because in cases of SW there is little need for youth to conceal absenteeism from parents who keep their child at home or make little or no effort to get them to school.

Keppens and Spruyt (2017b) identified a sizable group of youth (27%) described as "condoned social truants" because their parents knew about the absence, they were away from home when not at school, and they were with others. In these cases, our third criterion for TR is not fulfilled (i.e., "typically tries to conceal the absence from their parents"). These cases reflect some of the criteria for

TR (i.e., absence without the permission of school authorities) and SW (i.e., absence is not concealed from the parents), while not reflecting another criterion for TR (i.e., typically concealing the absence from parents). Clarification would be needed about the SW criterion pertaining to “little or no parental effort to get the young person to school.” In cases where there was little or no parental effort, the classification of SW would seem appropriate. The specifier “predominantly intentional” or “predominantly unintentional” provides direction for the practitioner in their assessment and intervention. For example, predominantly intentional may signal the need to assess and address parental attitudes towards education while predominantly unintentional may signal the need to investigate and respond to the family’s need for social welfare support. This would not exclude additional attention to the youth’s sense of connection with school, especially when some of the criteria for TR are fulfilled. If future studies replicate Keppens and Spruyt’s finding that there is a cluster of youth who are away from school and home, and the parents are aware of this, a fifth SAP type may need to be included in the typology.

Finally, TR and SE may overlap if a young person begins to secretly absent themselves from school as a result of the school’s inability to accommodate their needs. Similarly, SR and SE may overlap if the young person becomes emotionally distressed about attending school because of the school’s exclusionary practices.

#### *A Screening Instrument to Differentiate Between Types of School Attendance Problems*

To support educators, practitioners, and researchers in the identification of SAP types, we prepared the School Non-Attendance Checklist (SNACK; see Table 3). This is the first measure to simultaneously screen for the presence of SR, TR, SW, and SE, as well as nonproblematic absenteeism. It is a brief instrument, in keeping with the need for pragmatic measures (Glasgow & Riley, 2013). There are 14 possible responses for absenteeism (nonproblematic absenteeism in reasons 1, 2, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 14; SR in reason 3; TR in reason 4; SW in reasons 5, 6, and 7; SE in reasons 12 and 13) and one open item for other reasons. Reasons and associated examples were based on features of each SAP type emanating from our literature review. Based on input from experts in the US, UK, Australia, and Europe, the SNACK was structured so that the key constructs would remain constant (e.g., reason 1 is “absence related to a religious holiday or cultural observance”) while national and cultural differences could be accounted for in the examples (e.g., Chinese New Year or a Jewish holiday).

In a study under way, the SNACK is being administered to parents via on-line or pen-and-paper format, if school

staff identified absenteeism during the preceding four weeks. The instructions for parents read:

*Over the PAST 4 WEEKS your child missed X whole days and X half days of school. Students miss school for all sorts of reasons. We would like to understand the reason(s) your son/daughter missed school. His/her absences are highlighted in the table shown here [hyperlink to table, or printed table, showing the last 4 weeks]. There is a list of reasons below the table. For each whole day or half day absent, choose the reason that best explains the absence. For example, if your child was absent on November 7 due to extreme weather conditions you would put a “14” as the reason for absence that day. If the reason your child missed school is not in the list, put “15” at the relevant place in the table and tell us the reason using the space provided. Your calendar or diary/planner may help you remember (e.g., trip to the doctor, religious holiday).*

The distribution of responses across the 14 reasons indicates whether the youth’s absenteeism is characterized by nonproblematic absenteeism (e.g., a specialist appointment on one occasion and a religious holiday on another occasion), by one SAP type (e.g., reason 3 [SR] is endorsed for each absence), by a combination of SAP types (e.g., reason 13 [SE] is endorsed for one absence and reason 7 [SW] for other absences), or by a combination of problematic and nonproblematic absenteeism (e.g., reasons 5 and 8). The sensitivity and specificity of the items is yet to be established. We envisage the development of youth and school versions and variation in the time-frames applied (e.g., 1 week for youth). Youth reports are important for absences related to distress at school and skipped classes (Kearney, 2003). Youth may also report more reliably than their parents about SW because some parents are disinclined to admit keeping a child at home (Klerman, 1988). School reports are likely to provide a more reliable indication of concealed absence associated with TR, relative to parent reports (Berg, 1997).

The SNACK does not point to specific interventions in the way that the SRAS does. For practitioners, the predominant function of the SNACK is to support efficient identification of the type(s) of SAP in a given case, to facilitate more focused assessment, in turn supporting case conceptualization and intervention.

## **Conclusion**

The literature on SAPs testifies to a century of important thinking, practice, and research. There are currently two main schools of thought regarding differentiation between SAPs; one advocates the relevance of a SAP typology and the other advocates the functional analytic model based on the SRAS. Regarding the SAP typology, we acknowledge that SR, TR, SW, and SE do not

Table 3  
SNACK (School Non-Attendance Checklist) to Support the Identification of Nonattendance by Type

Over the PAST 4 WEEKS your child missed X whole days and X half days of school. Students miss school for all sorts of reasons. We would like to understand the reason(s) your son/daughter missed school. His/her absences are highlighted in the table shown [here](#) [hyperlink to table, or printed table, showing the last 4 weeks]. There is a list of reasons below the table. For each whole day or half day absent, choose the reason that best explains the absence. For example, if your child was absent on November 7 due to extreme weather conditions you would put a "14" as the reason for absence that day. If the reason your child missed school is not in the list, put "15" at the relevant place in the table and tell us the reason using the space provided. Your calendar or diary/planner may help you remember (e.g., trip to the doctor, religious holiday).

Reason	Examples
<b>My child:</b>	
1. had an appointment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a doctor's appointment</li> <li>• an appointment with a specialist</li> </ul>
2. was sick	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• had a cold or flu; had asthma</li> <li>• was in hospital</li> </ul>
3. was reluctant or refused	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• he/she said it was hard to go to school or to stay there the whole day</li> <li>• he/she seemed upset/anxious/scared about school</li> </ul>
4. skipped/wagged/truanted	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• he/she headed to school but did not arrive there</li> <li>• he/she left school without permission</li> </ul>
<b>I or my partner:</b>	
5. gave my child a day off	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• to give him/her a rest</li> </ul>
6. kept my child home for other reasons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• so he/she could help out at home</li> <li>• because school is not helping him/her</li> </ul>
7. arranged extra holidays	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• to take a family holiday during school-time</li> </ul>
<b>Our family:</b>	
8. had an urgent situation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a funeral</li> <li>• someone in the family was taken to hospital</li> </ul>
9. had other difficulties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the car broke down</li> <li>• someone in the family had a medical appointment</li> </ul>
10. had a religious holiday or cultural observance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chinese New Year</li> <li>• Jewish holidays</li> </ul>
<b>The school:</b>	
11. was closed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• public holiday / term holidays</li> <li>• curriculum day / teacher training day</li> </ul>
12. sent my child home due to his/her behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• he/she was suspended or expelled from school</li> <li>• he/she was asked to leave school for the remainder of the day</li> </ul>
13. asked that my child stay away from school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• because the school could not take care of my child's needs</li> <li>• because the school could not keep my child safe at school</li> </ul>
<b>Other:</b>	
14. weather conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• snow, floods</li> <li>• fire</li> </ul>
15. something else (please describe in the space provided)	

represent mutually exclusive categories and that typologies pose problems such as labeling. Nonetheless, considerable scientific support for the differentiation between SR and TR has been garnered over the years, negating the importunate suggestion that the distinction between SR and TR is artificial. Component and cluster analyses conducted with populations from education, clinic, and community contexts usually indicated a separation of SR and TR, and one study supported the existence of SW as a SAP separate from SR and TR. There is minimal co-occurrence of SR and TR and there are frequent reports of predicted correlations between SR

and internalizing behavior, and between TR and externalizing behavior. Differential psychosocial risk factors for SR and TR have also been identified. To disregard the scientific support for this typology and the clinical wisdom associated with its emergence is to throw the baby out with the bathwater. The SNACK screening measure may be useful in the process of differentiating by SAP type. Regarding the SRAS functional model, research and clinical opinion suggest that further development is warranted to account for factors not currently addressed in the model. Both approaches—the SAP typology and the functional analytic mode—have shortcomings, but

they appear to be valuable leads for educators, practitioners, researchers, and policymakers who wish to understand differences between youth with SAPs and thereby provide relevant support to youth, families, schools, and communities. A profitable avenue of research would be the comparison of the SRAS approach and the SAP typology presented here, to determine their relative merits in classifying SAPs and signaling the most beneficial type of intervention.

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