

The School Refusal Assessment Scale – Revised: Dutch Version (SRAS-R-NL)

Dr D. Heyne¹, Drs L. Vreeke¹, Drs M. Maric¹, & Dr B. Van Widenfelt²

¹ Developmental Psychology, Leiden University

² Curium, Leiden University Medical Centre

Background:

Children and adolescents who are intermittently or consistently absent from school face impairment in their social-emotional and academic development and are at risk of early school drop-out. Follow-up studies of clinically-referred young people presenting with school attendance problems indicate a risk for ongoing mental health problems in late adolescence (Buitelaar et al., 1994) and adulthood (Berg & Jackson, 1985; Flakierska et al., 1997; McCune & Hynes, 2005). The successful management of school attendance problems is both an important and complex task, and one which often presents a challenge to education and mental health professionals. A broad range of factors is associated with the development, onset, and maintenance of school attendance problems (Heyne, 2006), and this diversity of factors contributes to the challenge in managing school non-attendance.

The School Refusal Assessment Scale (SRAS; Kearney & Silverman, 1993) and its revision (SRAS-R; Kearney, 2002) were devised to aid the development of treatment plans which best account for the specific factors maintaining a young person's school refusal behaviour. Here, school refusal behaviour is taken to mean a school attendance problem which is 'child-motivated' (such as anxiety-based school refusal, or truancy), as opposed to a school attendance problem which is 'parent-motivated' (such as school withdrawal).

The theory of the author of the SRAS-R, Kearney, suggests that there are four key factors (called 'functional conditions') which might explain, singularly or collectively, the continuation of school refusal behaviour:

- (1) Avoidance of school-related stimuli that provoke a sense of general negative affectivity [ANA]
- (2) Escape from aversive social and/or evaluative situations at school [ESE]
- (3) Pursuit of attention from significant others [PA]
- (4) Pursuit of tangible reinforcement outside of the school setting [PTR].

The first two functional conditions are said to be associated with negative reinforcement of school refusal behaviour (i.e., strengthening of behaviour because of a reduction of negative stimuli), and the second two functional conditions are said to be associated with positive reinforcement of school refusal behaviour (i.e., strengthening of behaviour because of an increase in positive stimuli).

Examples of questionnaire items from the Dutch version include:

- “Hoe vaak voel jij je rot over naar school gaan, omdat je bang bent voor iets wat met school te maken heeft (bijvoorbeeld toetsen/repetities, leraar/lerares, brandalarm, klaslokaal)?”
- “Hoe vaak ga je niet naar school, omdat je het moeilijk vindt om op school met andere jongens/meisjes te praten?”
- “Hoe vaak zou je liever bij je ouders willen blijven dan naar school gaan?”
- “Hoe vaak ga je het huis uit om iets leuks te doen, als je niet op school bent onder schooltijd?”

The instrument comprises 24 items in all. There is a parent version and a youth version (which has been used with young people between 6 and 17 years of age¹), and a teacher version has recently been developed and is currently being evaluated. Based on the reports of the various parties, a ‘functional profile’ is developed, which directs decision-making about the targets for intervention with the young person and parents. An overview of the interventions is found in an article by Kearney (2008), and a comprehensive therapist guide and parent workbook are available (Kearney & Albano, 2007).

The earlier version of the SRAS-R – the SRAS – was found to possess good psychometric properties and to be useful in guiding intervention-related decisions (e.g., Kearney, Pursell, & Alvarez, 2001; Kearney & Silverman, 1990, 1999). The revised SRAS – the SRAS-R – has also been found to possess good psychometric properties (Kearney, 2002, 2006). French and German versions of the SRAS have been developed, and recently, a Dutch version has been developed and evaluated.

Psychometric Properties of the Dutch SRAS-R:

With the help of schools and youth services in various regions throughout the Netherlands, the researchers were able to administer the Dutch SRAS-R to 127 school-refusing young people. Statistical analysis of the responses of these young people facilitated evaluation of the psychometric properties of the instrument. It was found to have good internal consistency (Bootsma, 2007), meaning that the items are meaningfully related to each other. The Dutch SRAS-R was also found to have good test-retest reliability (Bootsma, 2007), indicating that it is a stable measure of school refusal behaviour. The validity of the instrument was also examined. Factor analysis supported the construct validity of the instrument, whereby three of the four hypothesized functions of school refusal behaviour emerged from the data (Vreeke, 2006).

¹ The ages of young people included in published studies of the English SRAS or SRAS-R are 7 to 17 years (SRAS; Daleiden et al., 1999), 6 to 16 years (SRAS; Kearney & Silverman, 1999), and 6 to 17 years (SRAS-R; Kearney, 2002). In our own work, we have used the SRAS-R-NL with young people between 8 and 18 years of age (in the pilot study) and 7 to 18 years of age (in the evaluation study), with a small group of these young people requiring help in reading the questionnaire.

Scoring and Interpretation:

The responses of the child and/or parent(s) are examined to determine the highest ranked 'functional condition'. A scoring form is available for recording the item scores derived from administering the SRAS-R-NL with the child and/or parents. There are two things to note about the questionnaires and the scoring form:

1) *32 items versus 24 items*

You will see in the questionnaire that there are 32 items in the child and parent versions of the Dutch SRAS-R, together with an open question at the end (item 33). This is in contrast to the English version which consists of just 24 items. During piloting of the Dutch instrument, it became apparent to the research team that the meaning of some of the items between items 17 and 24 (i.e., the 8 items added to the SRAS to form the SRAS-R) was unclear, and it was sometimes difficult for children and parents to apply the response scale to these items. The team decided to retain items 17 to 24 because they were most in keeping with the format of the original English-language items, and to develop and trial eight 'parallel items' which retained the same content but which were simpler in format. For example, item 18 ("If it were easier for you to make new friends, would it be easier for you to go to school?"/"Als je makkelijker nieuwe vrienden kon maken, zou het dan makkelijker voor je zijn om naar school te gaan?") was retained, and parallel item 26 ("How often do you want to stay away from school because: It is difficult for you to make friends?"/"Hoe vaak wil je wegblijven van school omdat: Je moeilijk vrienden kunt maken?") was added. This process of adding experimental items is recommended in the initial stages of the development of a translated questionnaire (Van Widenfelt et al., 2005), and further field testing and statistical analysis will be used to guide decision-making about the retention or removal of such items.

2) *Nine "laatste" items in the parent version*

You will also see in the parent version of the questionnaire that there are 9 new items added to the end of the SRAS-R-NL (under the heading "Laatste SRAS-R-NL Vragen"). These are experimental items potentially important for the assessment of school withdrawal (as opposed to school refusal and truancy). Following analysis of the functioning of these items, updated information will be provided with respect to the scoring and interpretation of such items. Presently, these items are not used in conjunction with the scoring form.

Mean 'functional condition' scores should be calculated based upon the full set of 'original' items (i.e., items 1 to 24), or upon the combination of 'original' items 1 to 17, and 'parallel' items 25 to 32 (see the scoring form). The highest ranked condition is then regarded as the primary reason for the maintenance of the young person's school refusal behaviour. When two or more conditions have equally high scores, the functional profile is regarded as "mixed" (Kearney & Albano, 2004). While specific interventions are suggested by the highest scoring functional condition(s), consideration must also be given to other assessment information (Daleiden et al., 1999; Higa et al., 2002; Kearney, 2001; Meyer et al., 1999). As suggested by Kearney

& Silverman (1996), once a descriptive functional profile has been derived via the SRAS-R, other assessment information should be used to confirm the strongest functional condition, prior to commencing intervention.

Further Information:

For further information about the SRAS-R-NL, whether in relation to its clinical/educational applications or research-related applications, please contact Dr David Heyne: heyne@fsw.leidenuniv.nl

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