

Abstract

Parental involvement is essential for addressing School Attendance Problems (SAPs), as parents play a key role in supporting their child's return to regular attendance. This study explores parents' experiences with a structured, manual-based intervention (Back2School; B2S), targeting youth SAPs. The interviews focused on parents' perceptions of collaboration with the intervention providers, school staff, the child, and the co-parent. Qualitative interviews were conducted with parents of nine children with SAPs who had participated in a Norwegian B2S-feasibility study. The findings, derived through reflexive thematic analysis, were summarized in three themes: 1) being understood and acknowledged, 2) collaboration and commitment, and 3) structured plans and concrete actions. Parents experienced important changes during the B2S intervention. Collaboration with the B2S team made parents feel acknowledged and supported, due to the teams' recognition of the SAPs complexity and appreciation of the parents' prior efforts. Parents reported improved school collaboration during the intervention, characterized by mutual understanding of the SAPs, and greater school commitment. However, a few parents reported persistent challenges in home-school collaboration due to limited school resources, lack of mutual understanding of the SAPs, unresolved conflicts, and a perceived unsafe school environment. Parents valued the active involvement of the child throughout the intervention, as well as the tailored, cognitive behavioral step-by-step strategies to cope with the youth's SAPs and psychosocial problems. Implications for future implementation and optimization of the intervention, as well as ways to involve parents in a collaborative approach to effectively address SAPs, are discussed.

Keywords: School Attendance Problems, systemic cognitive behavior therapy, Back2School intervention, parents' experiences, collaboration.

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Addressing School Attendance Problems (SAPs) among youth requires parental involvement, as parents are vital in helping their children resume regular attendance (Chockalingam et al., 2023). Missing 10% or more of school is considered a common threshold for identifying SAPs in many countries (e.g Kearney, 2021). SAPs appears to be an increasing problem, especially after the Covid-19 pandemic (Lester & Michelson, 2024; UDIR, 2025). In Norway, young people attend approximately 190 school days per school year and have a legal right and obligation to receive primary and lower secondary education, as stated in the Education Act (Lovdata, 2023). Although no Norwegian national absenteeism register exists for this age group, data from 10th-grade diplomas (15-16 years old pupils) reveal that the proportion of

students with 20 or more days of absence has doubled from 2018/19 to 2024/25 (UDIR, 2025). Several risk factors for SAPs have been identified, including individual factors (e.g., anxiety, depression, poor physical health, negative school attitude, externalizing behaviors, substance abuse), family factors (e.g., low parental- school involvement, parental health issues, ineffective family systems), and school factors (e.g., poor pupil-teacher relationships, and a negative school or class climate) (Gubbels et al., 2019).

SAPs are associated with both immediate and long-term negative consequences, including inadequate academic development (Carroll, 2010), impaired social-emotional growth (Malcolm et al., 2003), and risk of school drop-out (Calderon et al., 2009; Christle et al., 2007). Furthermore, school drop-out is linked to more long-term problems such as unemployment, incarceration, poor health, and marital strife (Kearney, 2016). Thus, offering effective interventions for youths with SAPs could prevent a range of short-term and future negative outcomes.

Parental involvement in SAPs interventions

To ensure effective and acceptable SAPs interventions, incorporating parents' experiences and suggestions is essential. Parents play a key role in motivating and supporting their child's return to school, but often feel powerless, lack knowledge, and experience emotional distress, which can strain family dynamics (Chockalingam et al., 2023; Havik et al., 2014; Hejl et al., 2024; Mullally & Connolly, 2025; Nielsen & Thastum, 2023). Thus, psychosocial interventions that provide parents with guidance, psychoeducation, and support are essential for successful SAPs outcomes (Heyne, 2023).

Various interventions for SAPs have been reported, including multifamily therapy (Roué et al., 2021), educational measures (e.g Canbolat, 2025), and pharmacological treatments (e.g Karbasi Amel & Hosseini, 2023). The prevailing practice, reflected in research, however, is multidisciplinary and integrated. Most studies on interventions for SAPs focus on cognitive behavior therapy (CBT), often in combination with other psychosocial, psychological, and educational approaches (Pérez-Marco et al., 2025). [Unlike adult CBT, the need for a systemic perspective is stressed in CBT with youth \(Friedberg & McClure, 2002\). Thus, CBT for youth encompasses both individual therapeutic strategies, along with interventions aimed at parents, the family system, and other relevant agencies, such as the school.](#) Although CBT is a promising approach for addressing SAPs (Jakobsen et al., 2025), one to two-thirds of youth with SAPs do not respond to existing interventions, suggesting a need for improving the interventions (Heyne, 2023). To enhance outcomes, research emphasizes the systemic approach where the youth's family and the school staff are even more closely involved in the CBT interventions, and where focus is on SAPs as well as youth psychological problems such as anxiety and/or depression (Heyne, 2023). Since parental and family factors can both promote and hinder school attendance, systemic CBT approaches that also target modifiable parenting and family factors underlying SAPs represent an important direction (Chockalingam et al., 2023). Thus, emphasizing parental roles, in addition to school involvement, is considered a necessary path towards effective CBT interventions for SAPs (Heyne, 2023).

CBT for SAPs [– a systemic approach.](#)

CBT interventions for SAPs are characterized by a clear theory of change that integrates core CBT components—such as modifying maladaptive thoughts, improving emotional regulation, and reducing avoidant coping, all targeted through strategies such as gradual

exposure, psychoeducation and behavioral activation—in a multimodal approach simultaneously addressing contextual and systemic factors (Heyne & Brouwer-Borghuis, 2022). Given the multifaceted nature of SAPs, combining CBT-theory with Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) provides a framework that considers individual, contextual and systemic factors. This approach highlights the interplay between the child, the family, school staff, and additional help services, emphasizing their influence on attendance and the need for collaboration and broad support.

Building on this comprehensive framework, collaboration among key stakeholders, i.e., the youth, the parents, and school staff, is essential to ensure interventions are tailored to individual needs and are sustainable over time (Heyne, 2023). The Back2School (B2S) intervention, developed in Denmark (Thastum et al., 2019), builds on the integrated framework described above. B2S is a modular, transdiagnostic CBT program designed to improve school attendance and address both psychological (e.g., anxiety) and systemic factors (e.g., pupil-teacher relationship, parent- child communication and interaction) contributing to maintenance of SAPs. Its transdiagnostic and modular approach ensures broad applicability across diverse psychological challenges (e.g., anxiety, depression, behavioral problems), allowing for flexible interventions tailored to the specific challenges and context of each child. [In the B2S framework, SAPs are conceptualized as complex and multifactorial difficulties that are maintained across multiple levels, including the child, the family, the school, and the broader system. SAPs encompasses diverse and often overlapping forms, including school refusal \(emotional distress associated with school attendance\), truancy \(unpermitted school absenteeism\), school withdrawal \(absenteeism predominantly driven by parent factors\), and school exclusion \(absenteeism predominantly driven by school factors\) \(Heyne et al., 2019\). From a risk- and](#)

maintenance-oriented perspective, the intervention focuses on identifying and addressing the processes that maintain SAPs. While B2S is informed by CBT, it does not assume that all SAPs develops or persist due to the same mechanisms, nor that an individual CBT model alone is sufficient to address these challenges. Instead, CBT principles are embedded within a systemic and ecological framework, combining child-focused strategies with CBT-aligned parent-focused interventions and structured collaboration with school staff. This integrated and systemic approach emphasizes coordinated action and shared responsibility between home and school as key drivers of change in effectively addressing SAPs.

Parental perspectives on enhancing interventions for SAPs

Investigating parental experiences may enhance our understanding of how the intervention functions in real-world contexts (Heyne & Brouwer-Borghuis, 2022; Nielsen & Thastum, 2023). Thus, exploring parental experiences of factors that facilitate or hinder collaboration can guide the improvement of SAPs interventions. To the best of our knowledge, only a few qualitative studies have so far explored parents' experiences with interventions for SAPs. A previous study by Hansen, Munkhaugen, and Larsen (2025) highlighted the transformative impact of introducing a school absenteeism team to address SAPs. Parents in this study underlined the team's collaborative and trust-building efforts. Furthermore, studies by Roué et al. (2021) and Sibeoni et al. (2018) highlighted the critical role of the school setting in addressing SAPs, with parents in both studies stressing the importance of increased school involvement in interventions. Collectively, these findings emphasize the importance of fostering trust, collaboration, and a supportive environment between families, professionals, and schools to facilitate positive change for children (Hansen et al., 2025; Roué et al., 2021; Sibeoni et al., 2018).

Hejl et al. (2024) synthesize findings from seven qualitative studies from the Nordic countries, indicating that parents often attribute SAPs to school-related factors and express unmet expectations regarding school collaboration. They report challenges such as poor communication, unclear plans, and a lack of initiative from school personnel, which frequently compel them to seek external professional help. According to parents, satisfactory support requires close cooperation between schools and families, while poor communication and inadequate collaboration remain significant barriers to the success of SAPs interventions (McDonald et al., 2023). These findings highlight the need to build trust and foster positive relationships and collaboration between parents and schools to improve attendance outcomes.

The Norwegian feasibility study of the B2S intervention

A feasibility study, conducted during the 2022–23 school year, explored the implementation of the adapted Danish B2S intervention within Norwegian community school and health services. The primary aim of this study was to assess the feasibility and acceptability of the B2S intervention and to refine procedures for a randomized controlled trial (RCT). This work is being prepared for submission as a journal article. The B2S intervention was delivered by interdisciplinary teams from health and school services, targeting school-aged youth (6–16 years) with more than 10% absenteeism in the past three months. A total of 14 children and their parents participated in the study, which employed a non-randomized pretest-posttest design, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. The present study includes qualitative interviews with parents who participated in the B2S feasibility study. Additionally, qualitative interviews were conducted with the children's teachers (Bania et al., 2025) and with the B2S teams, for which a journal article is currently being prepared for submission. The results from these interviews provide complementary perspectives on the B2S intervention. The feasibility

study is registered in the Clinical Trials Protocol Registration and Results System (PRS) under the trial number NCT05647499.

Aims

The present study is based on qualitative data from interviews with parents of youth experiencing school attendance problems (SAPs). The primary objective is to examine parents' experiences participating in the B2S intervention. Specifically, the study addresses two research questions: (1) How do parents perceive participating in a structured, manual-based intervention targeting youth SAPs? and (2) How do parents experience collaboration during the intervention—both with the B2S team, and school staff, as well as within the family?

Methods

The Back2School intervention

The B2S intervention is designed to address SAPs through tailored CBT strategies comprising interventions focusing on maintaining child, family, and school factors. The intervention begins with an initial assessment of the SAPs, involving the parents, the child, and school personnel. Based on this, a case formulation, a shared understanding of the challenges underlying the SAPs, and a structured plan to improve the school attendance are developed. The B2S intervention aims to reduce school absenteeism, enhance well-being, and reduce symptoms of anxiety, depression, and/or disruptive behavior. The intervention employs a parallel approach, targeting the child, parents, and school simultaneously. The program includes 11 weekly sessions with the child and/or parents, two to four meetings with the school staff, and three joint meetings with the child, parents, and school staff. The first six sessions comprise case formulation, psychoeducation, goal setting, motivation, step-by approach to increased school attendance,

communication and daily routines in the family. The next three sessions provide tailored interventions based on the case formulation (e.g., gradual exposure for anxiety). Two to four school meetings are conducted throughout the course of the intervention to address school-related factors (e.g., teacher - pupil relationship, classroom climate). Two booster sessions are held three months later to support maintenance/long-term progress: One joint meeting with the child, parents, and school staff, and one session with the parents and the child

Participants and procedure

Of the 14 families who completed the B2S intervention as part of the Norwegian B2S feasibility study, 10 had formally indicated their willingness to be contacted for qualitative interviews. When approached, all 10 consented to participate in the interview study. Parents received an information letter and were subsequently scheduled for a digital interview. Parents of ten youths were interviewed, involving 15 parents. All interviews were conducted during spring 2023 shortly after the B2S intervention had ended. Five interviews included both parents, three involved only the mother, and two only the father. One interview was excluded from analysis due to technical recording errors. The remaining children ($n = 9$) included five girls and four boys, with a mean age of 13.22 years ($SD = 1.5$), ranging from 11 to 15 years. The duration of the SAPs varied from one to six years.

Table 1: *Overview of informants, characteristics of their children, and duration of SAPs.*

Interview number	Informant	Gender	Childs age (years)	Duration of SAPs (years)*
1	Mother	Girl	15	2
2	Mother/father	Boy	13	5
3	Mother/father	Girl	11	3
4	Mother	Girl	14	6
5	Mother/father	Boy	12	3
6	Mother/father	Boy	11	2

7	Mother	Girl	15	5
8	Father	Girl	15	1,5
9	Father	Boy	13	1

Note. Based on parents' perception of the duration of SAPs

Due to geographical distances, all interviews were conducted digitally. The interviews were conducted in Norwegian and each lasted 60–90 minutes. They were audio recorded and securely stored in the “Secure access to research data and e-infrastructure” (SAFE) server at the University of Bergen.

All consenting parents were interviewed to capture diverse experiences. Thus, theoretical saturation was not a relevant consideration (Saunders et al., 2018). Following reflexive thematic analysis, we assessed adequacy based on information power and analytic sufficiency, including the richness, diversity, and coherence of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Malterud et al., 2016).

Interviews

The interviews focused on two main topics: (1) *Parents' experiences with the B2S program*, and (2) *Parents' views on collaboration during the intervention*. Follow-up questions were tailored to allow for an exploration of issues relevant to the two main topics. For the first topic, parents were asked how B2S was helpful or unhelpful in improving their child's situation, with follow-ups on shared understanding and the impact of intervention tools. For the second topic, questions addressed collaboration with the B2S team, the school staff, and others. At the end of the interview, parents were asked for suggestions on how to improve the B2S program, ways to support school attendance, and finally invited to share additional thoughts. The interview guide is provided in the Appendix.

Researcher positionality and reflexivity

The interviews were conducted by five interviewers, all with academic backgrounds in psychology, including four with a clinical psychology background. Three of the interviewers served as supervisors for the teams implementing the B2S intervention but did not interview parents from the teams they supervised, ensuring no prior acquaintance with the participants. The interviewer's role in implementing the B2S intervention may have influenced the research process by providing a deeper understanding of SAPs but also introducing potential biases in interpreting its causes and solutions. To mitigate bias, we used a semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions, which allowed parents to share their experiences more freely. Also, all interviewers participated in the analyses of the interviews to secure intersubjectivity.

Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed by a third professional party. The transcripts were analyzed in NVivo 12 Pro (Jackson, 2019).

Analytic strategies

A reflexive thematic analysis, based on Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach (2006; 2018), was conducted. This approach was chosen as it offers the flexibility and interpretative depth needed to explore parents' subjective experiences. It allows for an iterative process of meaning-making in which researchers' reflexivity is integral to the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019; 2021). Furthermore, an inductive thematic analysis was used, characterized by coding and theme development driven by data content, rather than by pre-existing theory. An inductive approach is assumed to be particularly suited for capturing peoples' own perspectives and experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2021). In phase one of the analysis, the authors (TSN, MR, HK, KW and BSMH) read through and familiarized themselves with the transcribed interviews. In phase two, two authors (MR and HK) generated initial codes and organized them into potential

themes. Coding was conducted at both semantic (surface meaning) and latent (interpretive) levels to identify patterns beyond explicit statements. The reflexive analysis included analytic memos and provisional theme maps to document and refine candidate themes. To explore parents' perspectives on the B2S intervention, we used an inductive analysis to develop themes from the data by clustering related codes (phase 3). The three overarching themes were developed through an iterative process following Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis. Related codes were clustered for shared meaning and coherence, then refined into candidate themes. These themes were reviewed and discussed by the research team to ensure they reflect patterns across the dataset rather than isolated instances. In phase four, coded themes were reviewed to deepen understanding, leading to the development of overarching themes. The final three themes were selected for their relevance, recurrence, and alignment with the study's aim. Alternative themes were excluded due to insufficient depth or coherence across participants. The themes were aligned with the study's aims and refined to highlight shared meanings (phase 5). In the final phase, two authors (BSMH and KW) defined and revised the themes for clarity. Example quotations were selected to illustrate core meanings and variations within each theme. All interviews were re-read to ensure the themes accurately reflected parents' experiences, including differing and contradicting views. The themes were then further refined into sub-themes.

Following recommendations for reflexive thematic analysis (Polat, 2025), we did not quantify themes but used qualitative descriptors (e.g., “many parents,” “most parents”) to convey prevalence, respecting the interpretive nature of the analysis. These descriptors were applied consistently, prioritizing ‘how’ over ‘how many’ (Polat, 2025). All codes, themes, subthemes,

and quotes presented originate from data in the Norwegian language. The names presented in the results section have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

Ethical considerations

The Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (SIKT) reviewed and approved the study (Project ID 462879). The parents received letters of information and gave consent to participate in the interview study.

Results

Three themes, each comprising two to three subthemes, were developed through the analysis of the transcribed interviews: (i) Being understood and acknowledged; (ii) Collaboration and commitment; and (iii) Structured plans and concrete actions. A summary and description of themes and subthemes are given in Table 2:

Table 2: *A theme summary table*

Themes	Subthemes	Characteristics
Being understood and acknowledged	From simplified solutions to understanding the complexity of the school attendance problem	Through the B2S intervention, all parties gained a deeper understanding of the complexity of the child's SAPs
	Someone to talk to, who listened and understood	The B2S intervention increased the parents' feelings of being acknowledged, listened to and understood
	Improved communication within the family	During the intervention, the emotional tone in the parent-child communication improved, as well as achieving increased agreement and shared responsibility between parents
Collaboration and commitment	Changes in communication and commitment	During the B2S intervention, school personnel became more committed and showed more responsibility for solving the SAPs
	Involving the child	It was essential to involve the child in the process and to take the child's perspective seriously

	Problems collaborating with the school	For some the school was involved too late, or not sufficiently, school environment was unsafe, schools had limited resources, and/or shared understanding of the SAPs was not achieved
Structured plans and concrete actions	Feelings of frustration and helplessness	Before the intervention, parents felt anxious and helpless trying “everything”. The schools had limited experience, knowledge and/or resources to cope with the SAPs
	A systematic structure with plans tailored to the individual child	Parents valued the concrete, detailed plans and the step-by-step approach for the child to return to school

Being understood and acknowledged

From simplified solutions to understanding the complexity of the problem

Most of the parents described the children’s SAPs having been challenging for a long time and had significantly impacted the daily lives of the families. Some parents had taken sick leave, while others had adjusted their work schedules to accompany their child to school or stay at school to ensure that the child remained during school hours. Before the intervention, parents described feeling exhausted and uncertain about what to do. They felt they were misunderstood by both school personnel and others. They expressed frustration with the simple solutions often suggested to solve the long-lasting and complex issues related to their child’s SAPs. Several parents described how others had a simplified understanding of the child’s SAPs, viewing it merely as a symptom of something being wrong with the family or the child. In their view, the simplified understanding of the situation had worsened the SAPs. One parent described how the school personnel, before the B2S intervention, understood the SAPs as an individual problem for the child, and were looking for the child to make the necessary changes: *“They have this underlying thought that there is something wrong with Amanda. And, you know, this is something Amanda also catches. Because all the time the focus is on what she can do, how she needs to adjust to this, and that she needs help with all her challenges. But no one says that:*

“there's nothing wrong with you, the school has to help you”. I think this attitude has been very important to help children in a situation like this, so that they don't feel there's something wrong with them. “

Many parents felt that, prior to the B2S intervention, their efforts to cope with a difficult situation were not acknowledged, and that the school perceived them as not trying hard enough to ensure their child's attendance. Some parents believed that the child's perspective had not been taken seriously, with the school failing to include or listen to the child. According to several parents, the complexity of the problems needed to be acknowledged before solutions could be found. A mother of a teenaged girl experienced that the B2S intervention helped all parties gain a deeper understanding of the complexity of the youth's SAPs: *“B2S gives a much deeper and more complex understanding of the problems and challenges on many different levels to unravel what is most important to address. I think it has provided a different understanding both for us and for the school and to understand the complexity. It's not just to entice or give some extra slack. Easy solutions are not what is needed in our case. It's not just one place where the shoe is pinching, and if we do something with that, it will all be solved. Humility is needed, understanding that it takes time, and we need to think a little outside the box.”*

Someone to talk to, who listened and understood

According to the parents, important changes occurred after starting the B2S-intervention, making them feel understood and listened to. Many parents described this process as a shift from feelings of uncertainty and being alone to being acknowledged and taken seriously. This change was important both for the parents and the child, as described both by the parent of a teenaged girl (the first citation) and the parent of a boy in primary school (the second citation): *“I think that for us the most positive change was that someone finally recognized that this was a huge*

challenge for us.” “When you are 12 years old and say that some things are difficult, it is easy to say that you just need to pull yourself together and attend school. But now there is a team that is there to help him, and he is taken seriously, heard and understood.”

After being involved in the B2S intervention, parents experienced that their efforts as parents were more acknowledged, and that their child’s problems were understood. The descriptions given by the parents had clear emotional and relational qualities, with frequent expressions of relief at finally having someone to talk to who would listen, offer support, and spend time getting to know their child.

Improved communication within the family

During the B2S intervention, changes also occurred within the family. Some parents described gaining a better understanding of their child, which led to reduced frustration and a calmer approach when communicating with him/her. One mother reported the following changes in how she communicated with her daughter after being involved in the intervention: *“Before, I was either angry, telling her (the child) that she had to get up and go to school, or I would slam the door to her room and give up. Now, I can sit down and ask if she is tired today or if there is something specific at school that she is dreading. I ask more open-ended questions..... I feel that we can take a step back now and look at what we should do, and I don’t just get frustrated. I also get tired of this, the constant worry that things won’t go well for her. But I feel calmer about it now, that it will be okay, it just takes a little time.”*

Whereas many parents were satisfied with their communication and collaboration as parents, some experienced improvements during the intervention. This is illustrated by a couple describing increased mutual understanding in how they both contributed to solving the child’s problems: *“I think maybe both of us gained a bit more respect for the work that goes into it, and*

an understanding of what it really is—how do you contribute, and how do you contribute—and then you sort of put it together.”

For some, improved parental communication resulted in a more balanced approach in how they handled the child’s SAPs: *“We’ve talked about how we, as parents, work together when the father has been involved. He’s probably a bit more like “poor her, let it be,” while I’m more like “go for it. We’re at opposite ends of the scale, so we’ve agreed to meet more in the middle. He should challenge a bit more, and I need to be kind sometimes and let things slide”.*

Collaboration and commitment

Changes in communication and commitment

Before the B2S intervention, a common experience among the parents was that the school staff had not taken sufficient responsibility for addressing the SAPs. Many felt that school personnel expected them, as parents, to resolve the situation on their own. Some parents found it difficult to communicate with the school personnel, while others were cautious to avoid creating conflicts that could negatively affect their child.

However, there were also a few parents who reported satisfactory communication and collaboration with the school before the B2S intervention, praising school personnel for their efforts to help their child. In many of the parents' stories, however, a notable shift was observed, characterized by improved collaboration with the school and increased commitment from school personnel after entering the B2S intervention. According to the parents of a boy in lower secondary school, these changes were due to the B2S team taking the main responsibility for communication with school personnel: *“Additionally, it was very useful for us that they (the B2S team) took charge of communication with the school. They spoke with the teacher and visited the*

school to discuss their actions. While we were also at school, they (B2S team) assumed the primary responsibility.”

In cases where improved dialogue between parents and school staff was established during the intervention, differences in expectation and misunderstandings could be resolved, leading to improved parent-school collaboration. A parent of a boy in primary school described an advantage of improved parent-school communication being the possibility of resolving mutual misunderstandings: *“We managed to uncover several misconceptions on both sides, really. We clarified what we expected from the school, and the school clarified their expectations of us. It was a bit like they thought we expected something, and we thought the school expected something, but we were able to resolve this.”*

After participating in the B2S intervention, many parents experienced that the school took more responsibility and became more involved in searching for solutions and making plans to improve the school situation. Some parents attributed these changes to the B2S team, which supported them and facilitated dialogue with the school staff. One parent described how, during the intervention, the school became much more involved and changed their way of working to solve the SAPs: *“The school is committed to a completely different level. They became much more willing to listen to her (the child’s) views on the challenges and difficulties. Then they started tailoring her schedule and began to find solutions. Previously, it was simply a matter of her just needing to be present, - period. We developed a step-up plan and began thinking more broadly and long-term.”*

Involving the child

Parents valued that all parties, parents, children, school personnel, and the B2S team worked together towards shared goals. Many parents particularly emphasized the importance of

involving the child in the process and taking the child's perspective seriously. Several parents believed that before the B2S intervention, the child's perspective had not been taken seriously, with the school failing to include, listen to the child, or even expect the child to be present at school. The latter was commented on by a parent who experienced the importance that the school explicitly asked about the child when she was absent: *"But the fact that the child isn't missed, or no one asks about the child—that's really important. That someone was curious, like, "Aren't you coming today?" or "Will you come a bit later?" Yes, that she was missed, you know. Again, it's very much about whether she feels seen."*

Involving the child was emphasized by several parents. This is illustrated by one parent who found that actively involving the child in the plans for how to solve the SAPs was an essential part of the B2S intervention: *"The difference was the dialogue with the school. Previously, I had requested meetings and expressed how difficult the situation was, but their response was simply that she (the child) had to be there. Suddenly, we experienced a shift in approach where she was met with understanding regarding her difficulties. It was also crucial for her to have a voice in the process. It doesn't help that we, as adults, plan for her without her input, which is what we have done before."*

For some families, being part of the interventions changed the willingness of the school personnel to listen to the child. A mother expressed that this was the start of implementing new solutions aimed at overcoming the SAPs: *"They (the school personnel) were much more willing to listen to her (the child) about what she found challenging and difficult. Then they started tailoring her schedule and began to look for solutions."*

Problems collaborating with the school

Not all parents experienced that the collaboration with the school improved during the B2S intervention. For a few parents, a satisfying collaboration was not achieved. According to the parents, there were several reasons for this. Some found that the schools didn't have enough resources to prioritize their child sufficiently. Others pointed out that the B2S intervention should have involved the school even more, and/or interventions should have been implemented at an earlier stage. This was especially emphasized by parents who perceived a poor school environment to be an essential reason for the child's SAPs. One parent suggested that to be able to solve his child's SAPs, the teacher should have had support from a larger team at the school: *"I believe a larger team from the school would have been better for her (the child). It's too much for a single teacher to follow up on. The school should have been involved earlier, or there should have been earlier meetings with the school. "*

Some parents perceived the school as providing an unsafe or unsupportive environment for their child, for example, due to a poor school or class climate, or experiences of previous or ongoing bullying. These parents didn't think the school personnel were sufficiently committed to making the necessary changes, or that the school personnel didn't have sufficient understanding of the problems present in the school environment. One parent thought the school had not assessed or understood the child's academic level or had not given adequate attention to the child's learning difficulties, making the school an unsupportive place for the child. One father experienced that the unsafe school environment had not changed during the intervention, and consequently, his child's anxiety and SAPs had not improved: *"We feel that we are still struggling with the fact that what makes her anxious is that the school environment is unsafe. This has not been sufficiently addressed."*

One parent who had not experienced an improved collaboration with the school during the intervention suggested that the school staff had not been sufficiently involved in the development of a shared understanding of the SAPs. If the schools did not have the same understanding of the problem as the parents, it was difficult to agree on what changes were needed, for example, in the school environment. Improving collaboration with the school was emphasized as especially important in cases of high levels of parent-school conflicts and when expectations between the parents and the school personnel differed. However, some parents did not experience a mutual understanding of the SAPs between themselves and the school was achieved. Consequently, the parent-school conflict was not resolved as described by one parent: *“I think the process of achieving a mutual understanding from the start, which also includes the school, could have been more thorough..... In situations like this, there is often some conflict between home and school. Therefore, getting help with that dialogue is, I believe, very, very valuable.”*

Overall, all of the parents emphasized that involving the school was critical to ensure increased school attendance. In most families, collaboration, increased communication, and more commitment from the school were achieved during the intervention, whereas unfortunately a few parents experienced that this was not sufficiently accomplished.

Structured plans and concrete actions

Feelings of frustration and helplessness

Most of the parents described having been uncertain about what to do, not knowing the right course of action or how to support the child before taking part in the B2S intervention. They experienced having been frustrated and anxious, struggling with the situation, trying

“everything” without succeeding. Some parents experienced that the school personnel did not know what actions to take, mirroring their own feelings of helplessness. One mother described the lack of knowledge and the inconsistency in the actions taken by the school to solve her child’s SAPs: *“I felt that the school didn’t really know what to do, so we tried various approaches.”*

Several parents experienced that the school either did not have enough competence, experience, or lacked resources to handle the child’s SAPs, as described by one parent: *“Yes, because it’s natural for us, when we find ourselves in such a situation, to seek out and try to understand what experts say about it, what can help, and all those things. Then we experience that the school doesn’t have that expertise and perhaps do things that we feel are contrary to professional advice.”*

A systematic structure with plans tailored to the individual child

A shift occurred in the parents’ experience when starting to explore concrete actions and solutions during the B2S intervention. Several elements in the intervention were mentioned as beneficial, such as the development of concrete, detailed plans, outlining a step-by-step approach for the child to return to school. Furthermore, they emphasized that the plans were tailored to meet the specific needs of their child. One parent described shifting from pushing the child *too* hard to creating concrete, goal-directed plans on how to return to school in collaboration with the boy: *“For the child, I think it also becomes difficult when parents have many expectations and pressures. We end up pushing the child more than we think is good, in areas that might not be beneficial to push. So having someone to guide us, like those at B2S have done, has been very helpful. They have pushed a lot, but it has been done together with him, deciding what to push on*

and with us. It has been targeted, focusing on where we want to go. We plan what to do next week to get closer to our goals. It was quite concrete and meaningful.”

Many parents valued the systematic structure of the program, helping all parties to know which tasks to focus on and what steps to take. Also, the flexibility of the B2S team was pointed out as beneficial, both concerning practical aspects like meeting scheduling and what elements from the program they focused on. Parents reported that during the B2S intervention, they were equipped with a variety of tools that made them function better as a family, such as setting goals, using praise and rewards, establishing everyday routines, and communication skills. Also, several parents experienced that the child's involvement in setting goals for gradually returning to school was important. The value of developing common goals and following a targeted approach was described by one parent: *“I believe the targeted approach and involving him (the child) in setting the goals, even if he doesn’t necessarily like them, helps because we all work together towards those goals. I think it strengthens the relationship because it provides predictability.”*

Discussion

This study examined parents experiences participating in a structured, manual based intervention for youth SAPs, addressing two research questions: 1) How do parents experience being involved in a structured, manual-based intervention for youth’s SAPs, and 2) How do parents perceive the collaboration with the intervention providers, the schools, and within their own families during the B2S intervention? Overall, parents experienced important changes during the B2S intervention. Collaboration with the B2S team made parents feel acknowledged and supported, particularly through the recognition of the complexity of the SAPs and valuing parents’ prior efforts. Parents also described improvements in collaboration with the school staff,

characterized by increased understanding of the SAPs, stronger commitment from the school, and more coherent, knowledge-based, goal-directed strategies towards the SAPs. The B2S team's role as a third party was regarded as crucial for facilitating these improvements. However, a few parents reported persistent challenges in home – school collaboration, attributing them to limited school resources, lack of mutual understanding, unresolved conflicts, and the school environment perceived as unsafe. Parents valued the active involvement of the child throughout the intervention, as well as the tailored, structured, step-by-step CBT strategies to cope with the SAPs and psychosocial problems. [Overall, parents' experiences in this study align with the B2S framework's conceptualization of SAPs as shared, relational, and context-dependent difficulties. Their experience supports the intervention's emphasis on collaboration across systems as a foundational element of change.](#)

A recurring overarching theme in parents' accounts was the importance of collaboration among all parties involved in managing SAPs. Parents' narratives reflected SAPs as a problem with relational and contextual dimensions, emphasizing the importance of supportive relationships and coordinated efforts as essential for facilitating change. This perspective aligns with findings from previous qualitative studies on SAPs (Hansen et al., 2025; Hejl et al., 2024; Nielsen & Thastum, 2023; Roué et al., 2021; Sibeoni et al., 2018). The present study contributes new insights into the aspects of collaboration that parents consider important for fostering cooperation in managing SAPs. These insights are summarized in three themes, which will be discussed in the following sections.

Being understood and acknowledged

The first theme captures parents' emphasis on the importance of feeling recognized, supported, and valued by all parties involved. Many parents described a marked emotional shift

moving from feelings of uncertainty and isolation before the intervention, to feeling that their efforts were acknowledged, and that the complexity of their child's SAPs was understood. This reflects the emotional and relational significance of having someone who listens, understands, and offers support— fundamental elements in building trust and facilitating progress. The findings resonate with previous research showing that becoming part of a supportive environment enabled families to move from isolation and stigma toward a sense of empowerment, a shift viewed as essential for facilitating change (Hansen et al., 2025; Roué et al., 2021).

In line with previous studies, parents also described prior frustration with school staffs' tendencies to offer overly simplistic explanation of SAPs, often framing the issue as solely within the child or family (Finning et al., 2020; Hansen et al., 2025; Havik et al., 2014; Mullally & Connolly, 2025; Nielsen & Thastum, 2023). For parents, the school's increased understanding of the SAPs as a much more complex issue during the intervention was one of the factors that contributed to their perception of improved home – school collaboration.

Some parents further described how the intervention had a positive impact also on interaction patterns and communication within the family. Initially, parents described uncertainty about how to support their child, and a lack of knowledge about managing SAPs. This challenge was also noted in Hejl *et al.* (2024), who links lack of knowledge causing parental emotional distress; e.g., frustration, powerlessness, and shame. Through the B2S intervention, parents reported gaining a better understanding of the situation, which reduced frustration and promoted a calmer, more constructive approach in interactions with their child. Improved communication and strengthened parent - child relationships have been highlighted as indicators of improvement following interventions for SAPs in several previous studies (Hansen et al., 2025; Heyne, 2023;

Nuttall & Woods, 2013; Roué et al., 2021; Sibeoni et al., 2018). Additionally, some parents described strengthened communication and collaboration between themselves, marked by a shared understanding of their child's challenges, greater mutual recognition of each other's efforts, and enhanced communication. As a result, they were able to adopt a more consistent and unified approach.

Collaboration and commitment

The second theme highlights parents' perspectives on the important role of collaboration and communication, mutual understanding, and shared responsibility between parents and schools, in managing SAPs. Before the B2S intervention, several parents felt that the school personnel did not take sufficient responsibility for addressing SAPs.

Many parents observed that, during the intervention, school personnel became more engaged, took greater responsibility, and actively participated in finding solutions to improve the school environment. The involvement of the B2S team was perceived as a shift in parent-school collaboration, largely attributed to their facilitation of dialogue and coordination between home and school. The important role of a third party in coordinating and facilitating communication, as well as fostering the partnership between home and school, has also been emphasized by Heyne and colleagues (2022). Teachers involved in the B2S intervention have similarly highlighted the value of the B2S team as an external professional resource facilitating collaboration with parents (Bania et al., 2025). The following questions emerge: Why might the involvement of an external third party help to enhance collaboration between schools and families and foster a sense of mutual commitment? For schools, does being observed and guided by professionals lead to greater engagement or a stronger sense of obligation to make an extra effort? Additionally, does

the introduction of more knowledge and systematic methods serve as a motivation for both parents and schools?

All parents emphasized that involving the school was essential to improving attendance. Prior research underscores the significance of the home-school collaboration in managing SAPs, highlighting how adequate collaboration fosters effective SAPs management in the school arena (McDonald et al., 2023). Also, enhanced school-home collaboration and adjusting the learning environment to the child's needs have been found to be pivotal to effectively prevent and manage SAPs (Havik et al., 2014). Thus, the improved parent-school collaboration and increased commitment from school personnel, experienced by many parents in this study, are promising for further implementation of the B2S intervention.

For a few parents, a satisfying collaboration with the school was not achieved. Consistent with findings by Roué et al. (2021), insufficient school involvement emerges as an unmet expectation, emphasizing the need for earlier and more active school participation in interventions. Qualitative interviews with teachers participating in the B2S intervention also emphasize their desire for earlier and more extensive involvement of the school in the intervention process (Bania et al., 2025).

Taken together, the present findings, together with the teachers' experiences as presented in Bania et al. (2025), show significant alignment between parents' and teachers' perspectives. Both groups emphasized the importance of collaboration, particularly strong school-home cooperation, and the valuable role of the B2S team in providing expertise and support to address the SAPs.

The parents highlighted the importance of involving the child in the assessment process, conceptualizing the SAPs, setting goals, and implementing new skills. This was also identified as

a positive aspect in a previous study on the B2S intervention (Lomholt et al., 2020). Similarly, Gregory and Purcell (2014) emphasized the significance of eliciting the child's perspective and voice, identifying it as a key concern for school non-attenders and their families. Furthermore, parents observed that when the school personnel's willingness to listen to the child improved, the school's initiatives were, to a larger extent, tailored to address the child's specific challenges.

The parents' positive experiences with the B2S intervention reflect key elements of effective SAPs interventions identified by Heyne and Brouwer-Borghuis (2022), including adopting an integrated approach, gaining a comprehensive understanding of the problem, and fostering strong, supportive relationships with youth and parents. Themes from the present study highlight the importance of engaging all stakeholders, assessing underlying factors, and prioritizing quality communication and support.

Structured plans and concrete actions

[The third theme explores parents' perspectives on the structured and goal-directed components of the B2S intervention. This encompasses both CBT-aligned individual strategies alongside parent and school-focused approaches, aimed at addressing and modifying the processes that maintain SAPs within home and school contexts.](#) The CBT elements were recognized by parents as a strength because they provided clarity and direction to the process. The findings provide insights into the specific CBT components that parents find helpful for fostering collaboration and communication, and for managing SAPs. Similarly, the structured and systematic nature of B2S was highlighted as a positive feature in the study by Lomholt et al. (2020). Furthermore, in their review of the literature Heyne & Brouwer-Borghuis (2022) encourage professionals to document their interventions by clearly outlining the overarching goals, specific objectives, and methods used, along with the hypothesized connections between

these elements. They also highlight the importance of balancing flexibility and standardization in SAPs interventions with a repertoire of methods that serve as a foundation for creating tailored interventions. Clearly specifying the methods helps to clarify why, when, and how professionals apply flexibility versus standardization, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness and implementation of the intervention (Heyne & Brouwer-Borghuis, 2022).

Strengths and Limitations of the study

This study has several strengths and limitations. One strength lies in the novelty of the research focus. Several studies have explored parents' experiences of having a child with SAPs, but very few studies have studied parental experiences during an SAPs intervention. Although the sample was small, it provides a good representation among participating families in the feasibility study. Also, the manageable number of interviews conducted allowed for in-depth analysis. The families who participated in the feasibility study reflected a diverse range of experiences, contributing to the richness of the data. The use of semi-structured interviews ensured a consistent framework across interviewers while providing the flexibility to explore diverse participant responses.

This sample consisted solely of families with a Norwegian background, which is an important limitation. As a qualitative study, however, the purpose was not generalizability, but rather to explore how parents experienced a structured SAPs intervention within the Norwegian school and health service context. While the findings are context-specific and may not transfer to settings with markedly different socioeconomic or cultural characteristics, they offer insights that may be relevant for similar contexts and comparable interventions.

Participation in the B2S intervention required at least one motivated parent, as motivation is a key issue when implementing CBT-based interventions like the B2S. This may have made parents more open to collaboration with the B2S team, contributing to their positive experiences. Nevertheless, the shift many parents described—from helplessness and frustration to increased empowerment—cannot be attributed solely to initial motivation.

Another limitation in this study is that children with autism or acute specialist healthcare needs were excluded from the intervention. Parents in such situations might have reported different experiences, and this exclusion should be considered when interpreting the findings.

Another potential limitation concerns the risk of social desirability bias, as our dual roles as interviewers, supervisors for the B2S teams, and researchers may have influenced parents to provide more positive responses. Although we encouraged honest feedback, using independent interviewers could have reduced this bias.

In addition, the pragmatic mix of individual and joint interviews may have influenced participants' comfort in discussing sensitive aspects of collaboration, particularly within the family as joint interviews can shape how individual perspectives are expressed.

Conducting interviews digitally had both advantages and limitations: it enabled nationwide participation and reduced potential bias by involving interviewers from different regions who had no prior knowledge about the family. However, the digital format may have limited the depth of interaction compared to face-to-face interviews, potentially affecting the richness of the data collected.

Thus, while the study offers valuable insights into parental experiences during the B2S intervention, the identified limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings.

Implications of the findings

Based on parents' experiences from the B2S intervention, several implications can be drawn regarding how interventions for SAPs should be implemented and optimized in the future. Firstly, building trust and fostering supportive relationships among all stakeholders should be a priority, as this is essential to be able to create meaningful change. Secondly, adopting an approach that fosters understanding among parents, school personnel, and service providers, addressing both individual and systemic factors, is recommended. Thirdly, interventions should prioritize strengthening home-school collaboration in managing SAPs by enhancing dialogue, mutual understanding, and shared responsibility, potentially through the support from an external third-party. Fourthly, in cases of persistent or unresolved parent-school conflict, where expectations diverge, and a shared understanding of SAPs challenges cannot be reached, prioritizing further efforts to improve collaboration seems crucial. When a mutual understanding is lacking, it may be necessary to pause and reassess whether the conflict can be resolved, identify alternative measures to support the child's return to school, and determine whether a school change may be necessary. The findings also emphasize the importance of addressing systemic barriers within schools, such as resource constraints and the need to create a safe, supportive class and/or school environment. Fifthly, it is important to actively involve the child in goal setting, planning and decision-making to ensure their perspective and challenges are addressed in interventions for SAPs.

Future Research Directions

For future research, further examining the perspectives of parents, children, and teachers is warranted. The different viewpoints are important for gaining a comprehensive understanding of the intervention's impact and for identifying potential areas for optimization of SAPs

interventions. By integrating insights from all three parties, we can ensure that interventions are practical and acceptable.

The study's limitations point to the need for further research. Future studies should explore the experiences of more diverse populations, including families with children needing adapted measures. Both qualitative and quantitative studies are needed to understand how interventions for SAPs work. Enhancing our understanding of the factors that either promote or hinder the effectiveness of interventions and collaborative efforts is crucial. Equally important is gaining insight into how to best tailor interventions to meet individual needs.

Conclusion

The study indicates that parents experienced meaningful changes during the B2S intervention. Key factors contributing to positive experiences included feeling understood, respected, and acknowledged for the challenges they face, their strengths, and their efforts to manage the SAPs. Actively involving the child in setting goals, and planning actions, alongside shared commitment and responsibility from all parties, was crucial. Parents emphasized the importance of involvement from school personnel and valued the structured, CBT step-by-step approach of the B2S intervention. Future implementation should prioritize building trust and fostering supportive relationships between families and intervention teams, foster a mutual understanding of SAPs including both individual and systemic factors, strengthen the home – school collaboration and address ongoing and unresolved conflict. [Thus, embedding CBT principles within a systemic framework, as exemplified by the B2S program, highlights the necessity of collaboration, shared responsibility and coordinated action between families, schools, and support systems.](#)

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