

Case Study: Max

Time Point 1 – Grade 2

Max is a 7-year-old boy in Grade 2 attending a government primary school. He is an only child of Zi and Grace, who migrated to Australia from China in 2016. Mandarin is the primary language spoken at home.

Max experienced early and prolonged separation from his parents and can be described as a “satellite baby” - a child who is cared for by extended family overseas while parents work or establish themselves financially. At 11 months of age, Max was sent to China to live with his paternal grandparents while his parents remained in Australia to work and save for a house. He remained in their care for several years before returning to Australia in the final term of kindergarten prior to commencing primary school locally.

Since starting school, Max has presented with increasing behavioural and emotional difficulties, which have escalated significantly during Year 2. His classroom teacher reports that he requires close supervision throughout the day, both in the classroom and during breaks. In the playground, Max becomes highly distressed during peer conflict and has responded with physical behaviours including pushing, scratching, spitting, and throwing stones. In the classroom, Max has significant difficulty remaining seated and sustaining attention. He frequently leaves his desk, rips up his own or others’ work, and has attempted to leave the classroom without permission. On several occasions, his behaviour has escalated to the point where the school has implemented lockdown procedures to ensure the safety of Max and other students.

School attendance has also become increasingly difficult. Max expresses strong dislike of school and demonstrates clear distress in the mornings, including crying, resisting getting into the car, and physical agitation. The school has implemented a transition routine whereby his mother brings him to the school gate and staff escort him to the wellbeing space before transitioning him to class. Despite these adjustments, there are times when his distress is so significant that the school contacts his parents to collect him early, as they are unable to safely manage his behaviour.

The school has implemented an Individual Learning Plan (ILP) focusing on social, emotional, and behavioural goals. Classroom strategies include use of the Zones of Regulation framework and a positive behaviour reinforcement system (Dojo points). However, Max is frequently observed to be in the “red zone,” indicating heightened emotional arousal and limited capacity for self-regulation. He finds unstructured or language-heavy tasks particularly challenging, including silent reading and small-group literacy sessions.

Following concerns raised at a Student Support Group (SSG) meeting, the school recommended a psychoeducational assessment. Results indicated overall cognitive functioning within the Average range; however, Max demonstrated significantly reduced Processing Speed and Working Memory (both in the Very Low range). Academic assessment identified reading skills at a Foundation level, with limited phonics knowledge, weak decoding skills, and poor word recognition.

Reflective Questions

1. What are some contributing factors that might be contributing to Max's experience of school can't?
2. What stressors, life experiences, or adversities may be impacting Max's capacity to attend and engage with school?
Prompt: Consider internal/biological factors, family and attachment experiences, cultural and migration-related factors, and broader community or systemic influences.
3. How might Max's early life experiences prior to commencing school have shaped his sense of safety, trust and expectations?
4. How could Max's presentation of externalising behaviours influence how school staff interpret his needs and the types of responses or interventions that are implemented?
5. In what ways could Max's support plans be strengthened to improve Max's experience or capacity to attend school?
6. How can the school work collaboratively with Max's parents in a culturally responsive and strengths-based manner?
7. What considerations are important when preparing to meet with the student, family, and school, to establish a positive, safe, and collaborative working environment?
8. How might psychologists assist in the development of a shared understanding of Max's experiences across all stakeholders involved?

Time Point 2 – Year 7

Max is now 12 years old and in Year 7 at a large mainstream secondary school. The transition from primary to secondary school has been difficult. While his previously prominent externalising behaviours have reduced, there has been a marked shift in his presentation toward internalised distress, emotional shutdown, and disengagement across school and home contexts. His attendance at school has declined significantly since Term 1, and he now is often late (arriving after recess) or does not come to school at all.

His teachers at school describe him as quiet, withdrawn, and difficult to engage. He often appears shut down in class, avoids eye contact, and gives minimal verbal responses when approached by teachers. He rarely volunteers answers and may sit passively for extended periods, particularly during independent work. When he becomes overwhelmed, Max is more likely to disengage by putting his head down or requesting to leave the classroom.

Max has begun receiving detentions for minor infractions, including forgetting his hat during PE, arriving late to class, and not having required equipment such as his laptop charger.

Academically, Max is struggling to keep pace with the increased demands of secondary school. He finds it difficult to initiate tasks independently and frequently does not complete written work. Multi-step instructions are overwhelming, and tasks requiring sustained attention, reading, or writing are often avoided.

Socially, Max wants connection and actively attempts to make friends at his new school. However, these attempts are often unsuccessful. Teachers and parents report that Max sometimes “says the wrong thing” in social situations, including comments that are perceived by peers as awkward, blunt, or inappropriate. On several occasions, Max has made comments about peers that were interpreted negatively, resulting in teasing, exclusion, and a small number of incidents involving unkind or mocking messages sent via Snapchat.

At home, Max’s parents describe him as emotionally flat and increasingly disengaged. Both parents work long hours in their family-run shop, and Max is often at home by himself in the mornings before school. After school, he spends long periods alone in his room playing online video games, particularly *Call of Duty* and *Tom Clancy’s Rainbow Six Siege*. Gaming appears to serve as a primary source of regulation, escape, and social connection, and Max becomes irritable or distressed when limits are suggested. He often stays up until the early hours of the morning gaming.

Family relationships have become more strained. Max has become increasingly demanding of his parents, insisting they buy him specific items and refusing to eat meals prepared at home, instead insisting on takeaway food. His mother reports finding it difficult to say no to his requests, describing this as a way of expressing love and maintaining connection, particularly given how withdrawn Max has become. At the same time, both parents feel disappointed and frustrated that Max refuses to help around the house, leaves his room and shared spaces very messy, and frequently speaks to them rudely.

How has the High School responded so far

Following Max’s transition to secondary school, information provided by his primary school was limited in detail, with greater emphasis on his earlier externalising behaviours than on his evolving emotional and learning needs. As a result, secondary staff initially perceived Max as a student whose behaviour had “improved,” rather than recognising a shift toward internalised distress. Initial responses to Max have been largely reactive, occurring once concerns became visible, and included referral to year level and wellbeing staff, brief check-ins, and informal access to withdrawal or wellbeing spaces. These supports have been inconsistently applied across subjects and often relied on Max self-identifying distress or teachers noticing difficulties, rather than being part of a coordinated plan.

Attempts to increase engagement so far have focused primarily on behavioural and organisational expectations, including reminders to be organised, use a planner, and comply with school routines, alongside consequences such as detentions for minor infractions (e.g., lateness, missing equipment). Academic adjustments have been informal and inconsistent, with some teachers reducing workload or accepting incomplete work to avoid escalation. Communication with Max’s parents has largely been problem-focused and conducted in English, creating additional barriers given the family’s limited English proficiency. Interpreter support has been

used only for formal meetings, if at all, resulting in parents being informed rather than actively involved in decision-making.

Reflective Questions

9. What might a coordinated, proactive support plan look like for Max as he transitions into Secondary school? And who needs to be involved for this to be effective?
10. What lessons does Max's case offer about transition planning (and timing) from primary to secondary school?
11. As Max moves from primary school into adolescence, how should we think about the role of reassessment?
Prompt: How do we decide whether further psychoeducational testing will clarify the formulation, alter intervention, or risk reinforcing a deficit narrative?
12. What systemic constraints or barriers do schools commonly encounter when developing and sustaining comprehensive support plans for students like Max?
13. What alternate or flexible schooling pathways might families consider when mainstream settings are not currently meeting a young person's needs?
14. How can professionals work collaboratively with minoritised or disadvantaged families to promote inclusive, culturally-responsive and genuinely shared decision-making?
15. How might we better recognise and support the parent-carer experience across prolonged periods of school difficulty and uncertainty?