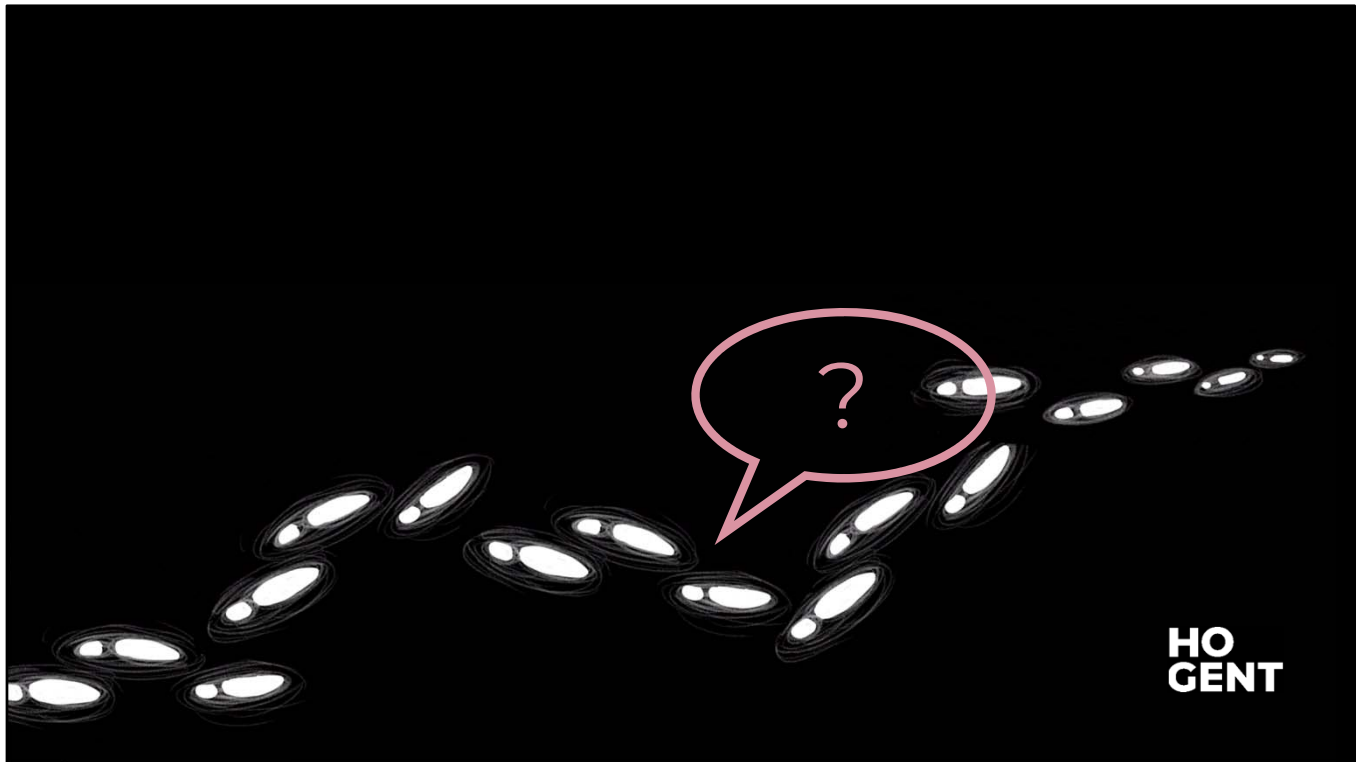


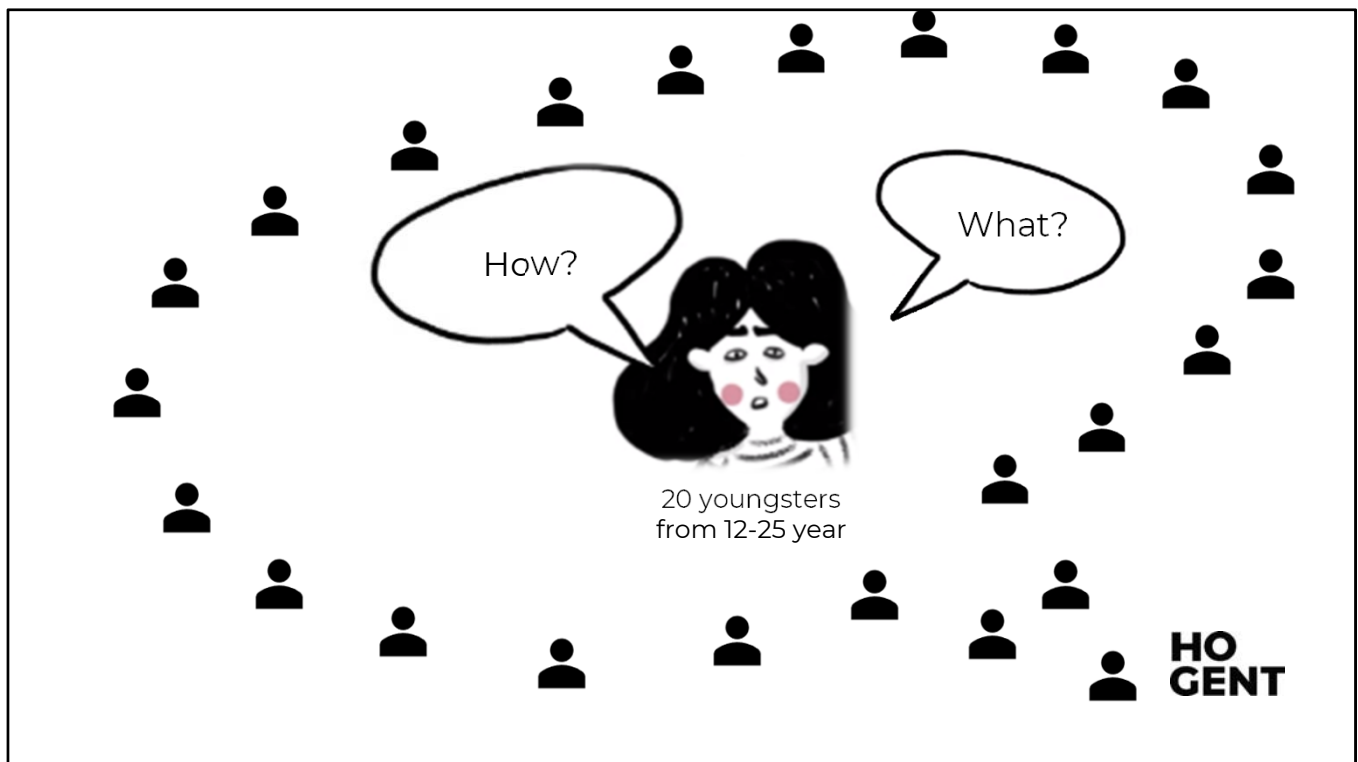
scared of the schoolgate?

what schools can do against school refusal

**HO
GENT**



In this lecture we will show you the results of our research concerning school refusal. The demand for this research came from '*De Kaap*', the child and youth psychiatry in Melle (Belgium), which has an inpatient treatment and an outpatient treatment, especially for school refusal. They have clinical expertise about school refusal. It was important to delineate our target group of youngsters by defining school refusal in the same way as Berg & Heyne. From the beginning we did not focus on the clinical population; as you know within the group of school refusers about half of the group can be defined as clinical, with a diagnosis. Our focus was the other half, and that is, as you will see, a hard group to reach. This is typical for our target group : they stay under the radar.



At the start of our research the focus shifted from hospital to school as we believe in the importance of early intervention in the approach and the further development of school refusal. We used multiple case-study as research method, placing the story of the youngster at the heart. With his or her consent we also listened to involved parties such as teachers, doctors, friends, parents, grandparents etc.

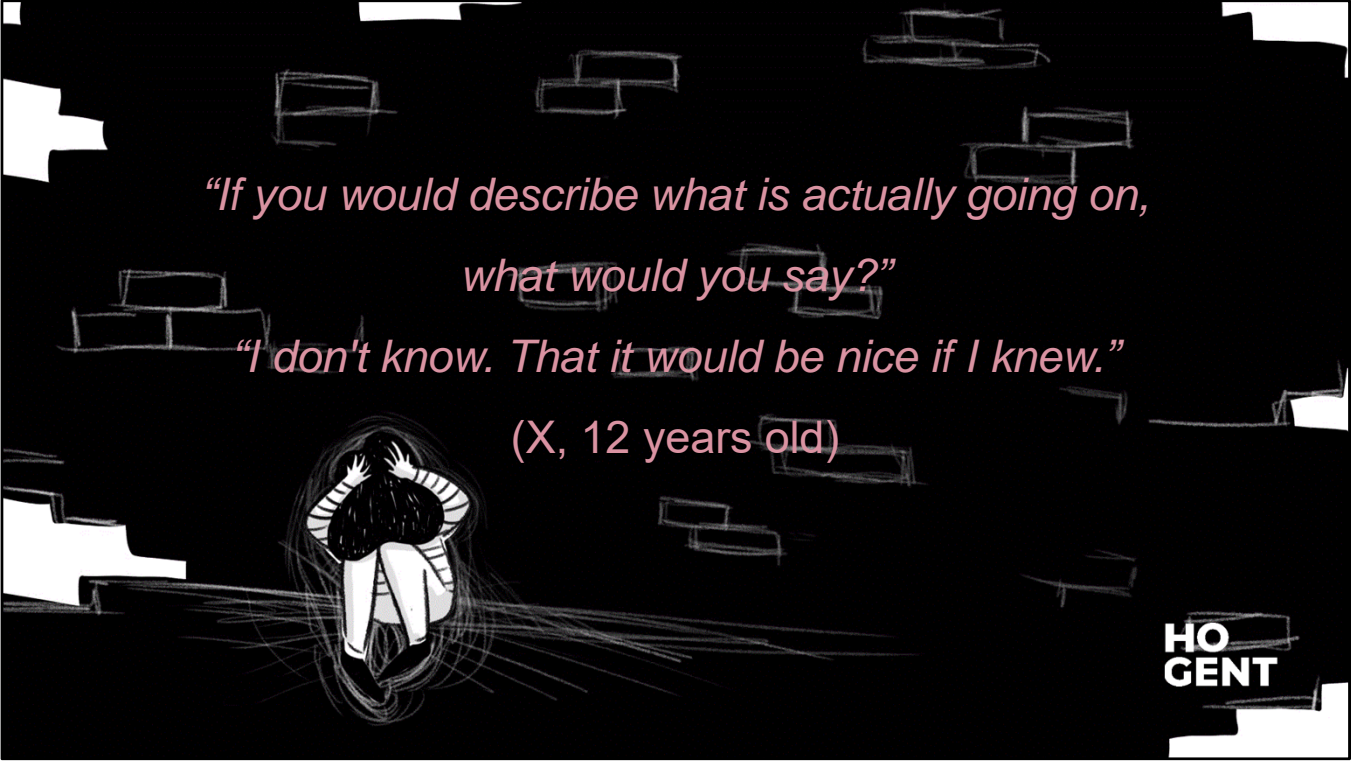
What we asked these youngsters was: 'How they and the involved parties experience and describe school refusal' and 'What did and did not help in the approach.'

As purpose of the research we had: 'Spreading the experience of the often unknown concept of 'school refusal', and 'Provide tools to schools and care to prevent, recognize and remedy school refusal as early as possible'.

We looked for multiple youngsters (that fit the criteria) that showed behaviour of school refusal. This was a challenge as they are not at school and therefore hard to find, and secondly as some of them experience difficulties and hesitation to discuss this. In order to create a snowball effect to reach youngsters willing to talk about these difficult situations, we followed different paths. We placed calls on social media, we made contact with schools and other involved organizations. Eventually, after a heavy process, we found 8 youngster between the age of ten

and seventeen willing to testify. The fact that they are hard to reach and to communicate with is also significant for this difficult to define target group. We also interviewed 12 young adults older than 17. We wondered how they looked back on this period of school refusal and what they believed to have or have not helped them.

These interviews were, with their consent, recorded and literally written down, encoded, analysed and conceptualized.

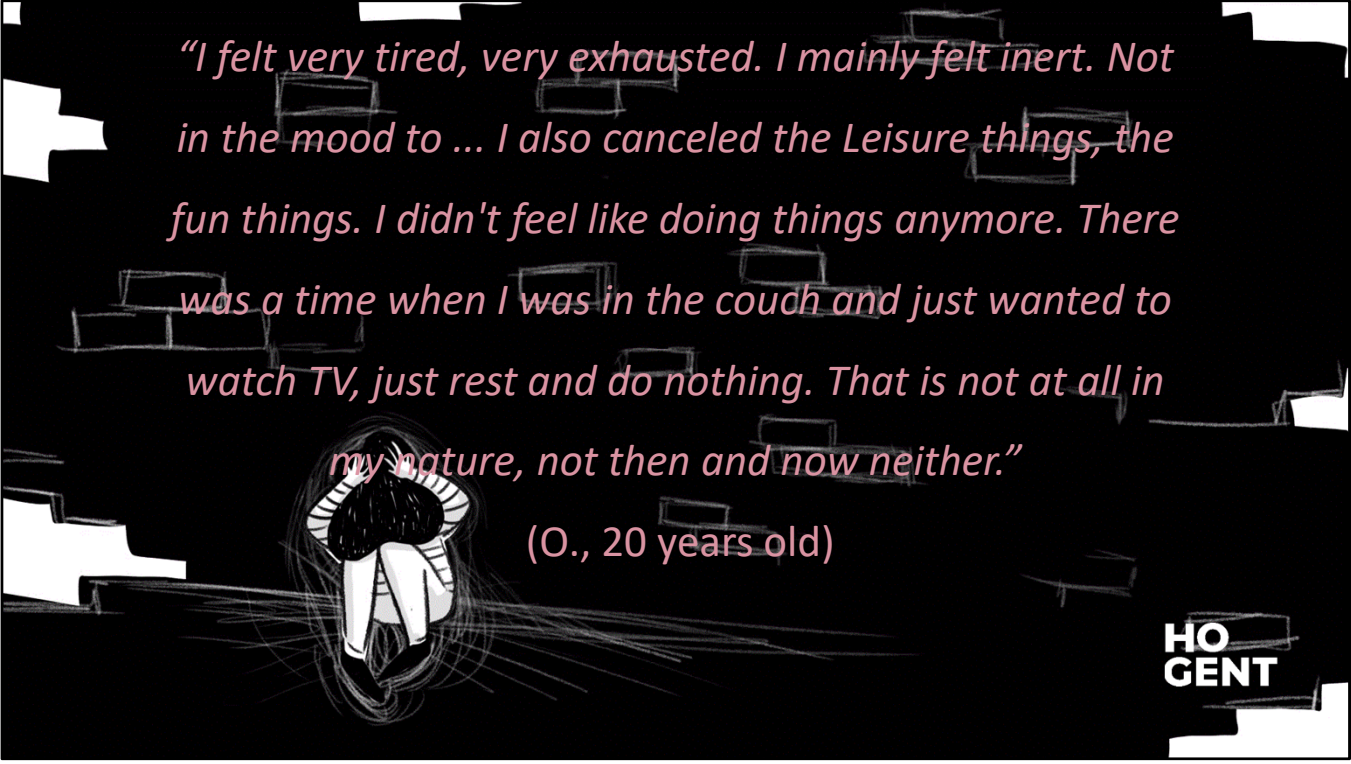


*"If you would describe what is actually going on,
what would you say?"*

"I don't know. That it would be nice if I knew."

(X, 12 years old)

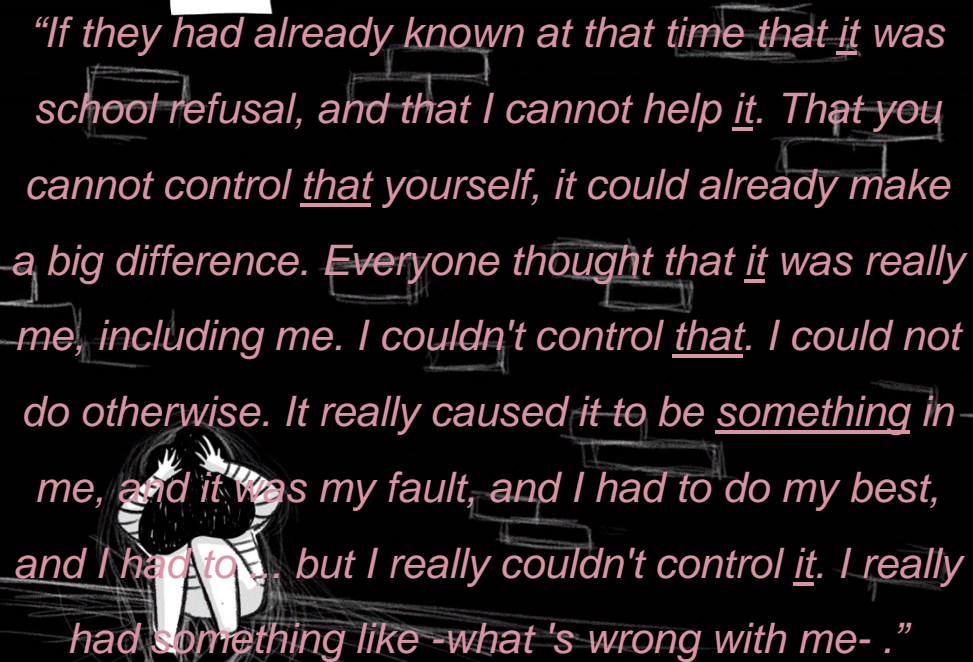
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"I felt very tired, very exhausted. I mainly felt inert. Not in the mood to ... I also canceled the Leisure things, the fun things. I didn't feel like doing things anymore. There was a time when I was in the couch and just wanted to watch TV, just rest and do nothing. That is not at all in my nature, not then and now neither."

(O., 20 years old)

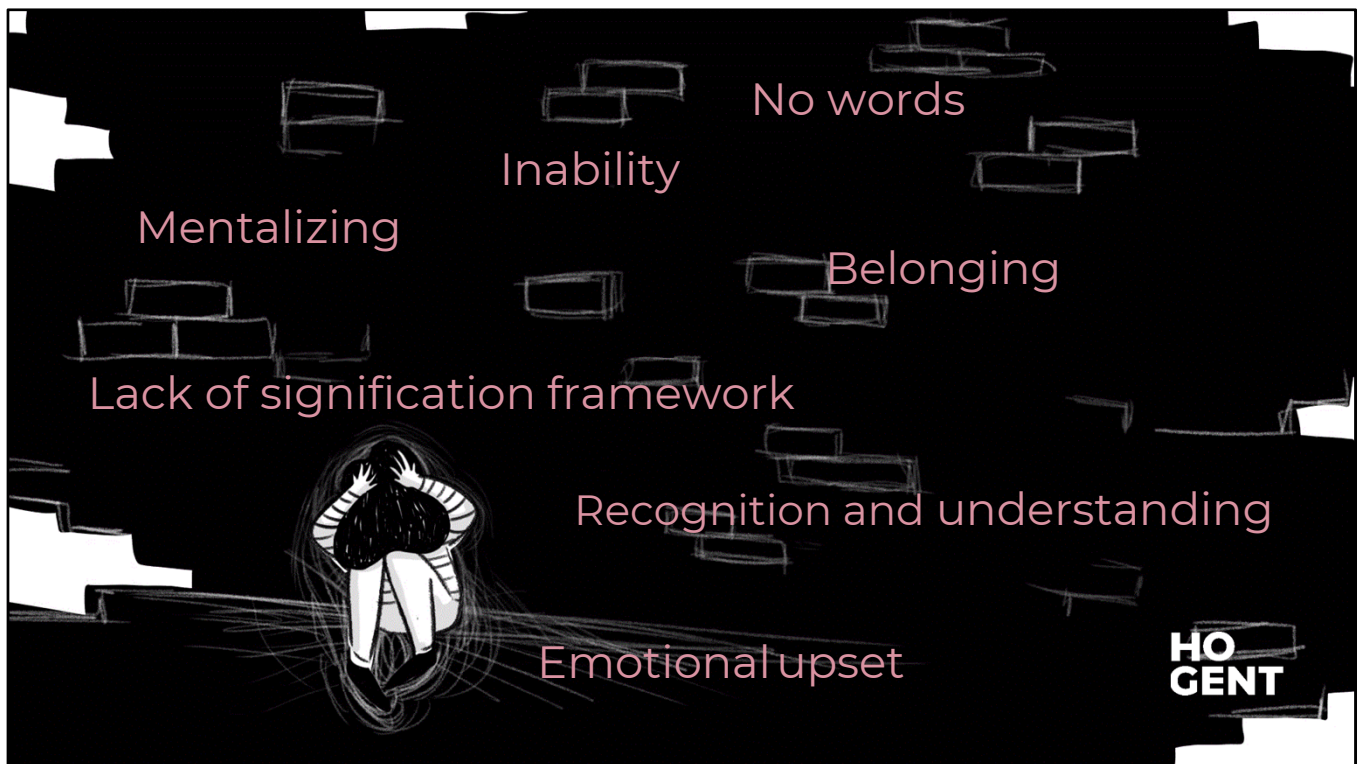
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"If they had already known at that time that it was school refusal, and that I cannot help it. That you cannot control that yourself, it could already make a big difference. Everyone thought that it was really me, including me. I couldn't control that. I could not do otherwise. It really caused it to be something in me, and it was my fault, and I had to do my best, and I had to ... but I really couldn't control it. I really had something like -what 's wrong with me- ."

(E., 23 years old)

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Firstly, we notice the difficulty for youngsters (and context) to put the school refusal into words. They are in a state of 'inability' to go to school, not always knowing what's happening. I want to go, but I can't. Some of the youngsters have a feeling of loneliness and not belonging; they drop out and feel like being the only person with that kind of problem. The disconnection with school and the risk to lose contact with friends, family,...

Most of all, they feel misunderstood. They don't understand what's happening. Parents and schools react very differently, what makes the situation even worse. They are very desperate. Since it's not a diagnosis, we miss a reference frame and the youngsters miss recognition.

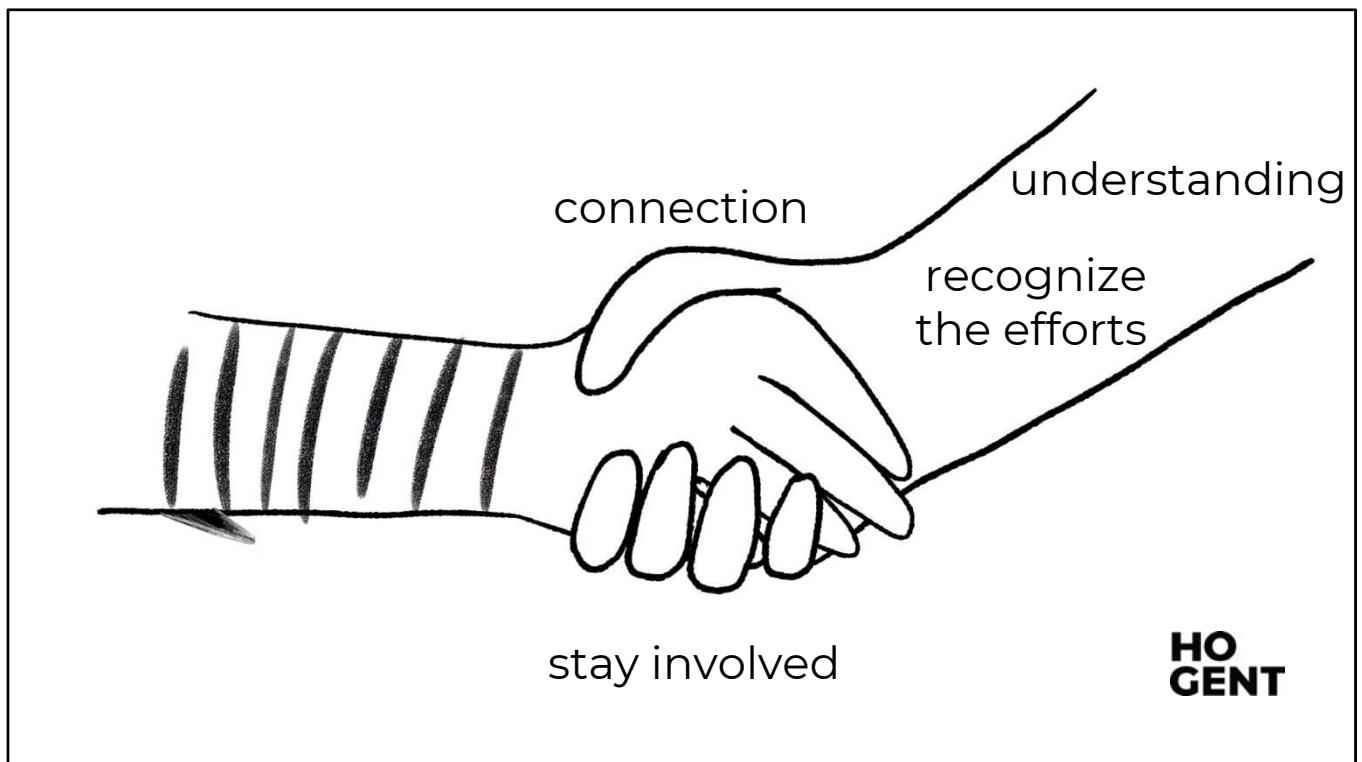
When people miss a this framework, it becomes hard for them to *mentalize* the situation. We tend to a more 'teleological way' of thinking which means an interpretation of facts, not of the underlying feelings.



An important issue in the problem of school refusal is the recognition of school refusal for youngsters, parents, schools, but also a way to get more understanding.

Because images tell more than words, we made an animation movie based on our interviews.

You can watch this movie on our website: www.hogent.be/schoolrefusal



What do these and other cases teach us?

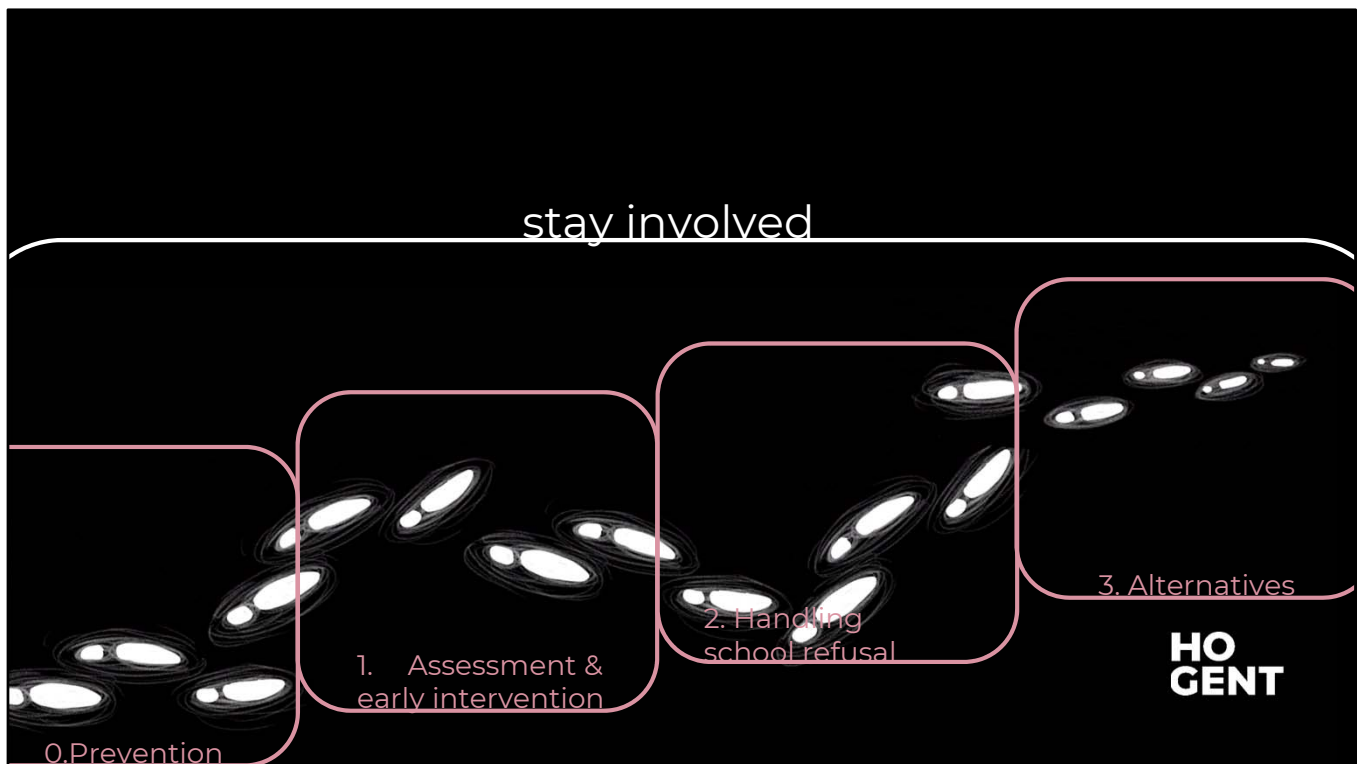
- Parents **don't know** how to react when their child refuses to go to school. They tend to react defensive and protective.
- Schools don't know what's going on either. If **communication** and **connection** don't fit, there's a risk for misunderstanding and looking for guilty parties.
- Therefore, a **sensitive and accessible attitude** for schools is fundamental to capture signals of school refusal.

Within the school it is very important to have someone who has a good view on the situation at home and is accessible for parents. Someone who **tries to understand** the situation. The feeling of being understood, we call this *mentalize*, is crucial in the dynamic of school refusal. In all further steps, such person is needed. We call him/her the **key person**. He or she **stays connected** with the family and if possible with the youngster. One **recognizes** the **efforts** made done by all involved persons (youngster, school, parents,...)

For schools, **staying involved**, even when caregivers (like a therapist or other professional) are involved. A good working relationship with a crucial role for the school is the best guarantee for success.

How can we help schools to have a better feeling, for school non-attendance, so

that communication between school, parents, youngster is facilitated? Schools want concrete tools whereas adjusting the mindset and the attitude are far more necessary.

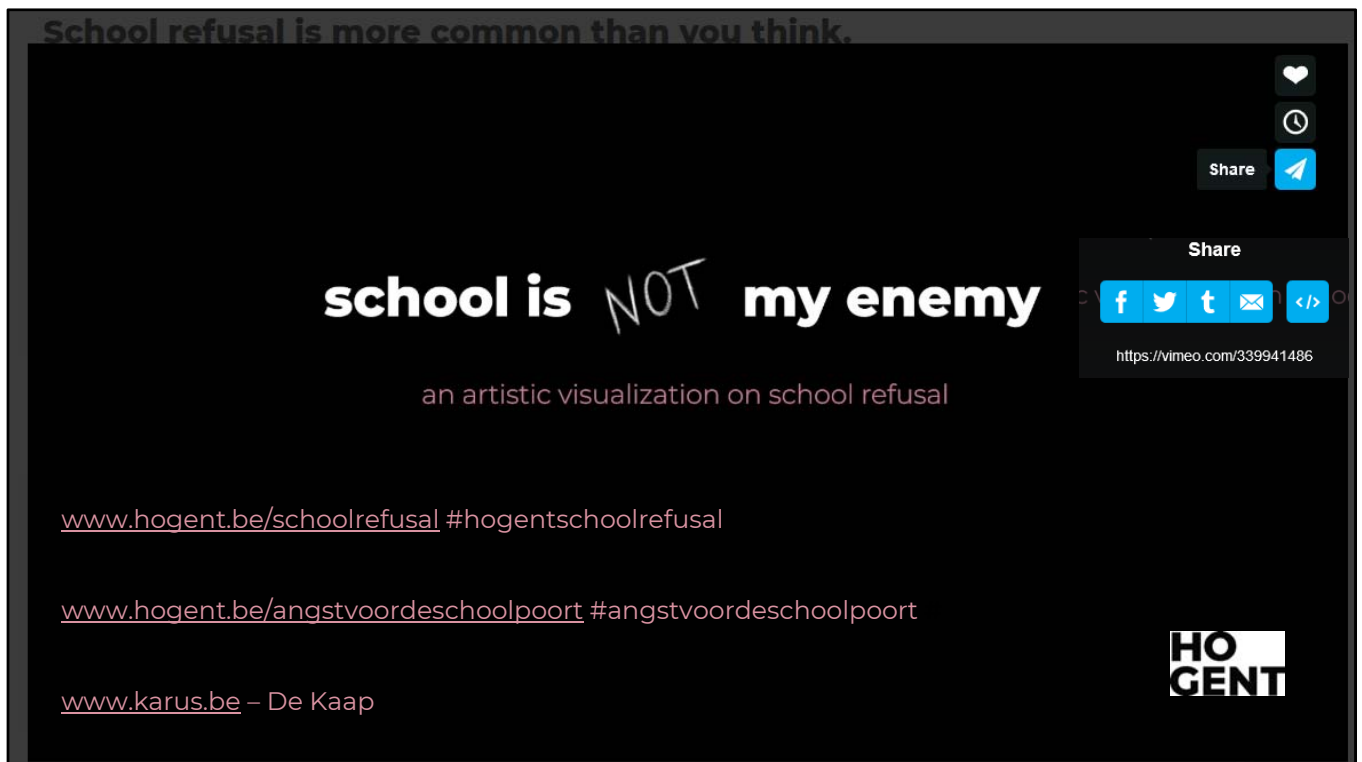


We developed an instrument adopted to the context of education, in which care for pupils and students is divided in 4 phases. You can compare these phases with the tiers of Kearney but applied on the Flemish situation in education.

Those phases go from (0) prevention, up to (phase 1) assessment & early intervention, (phase 2) handling school refusal and (phase 4) very specialized help and alternatives for school.

We developed a **reflect and act tool**, that can help schools to create awareness about this problem and to act in a way that is helpful and prevents escalation.

We want to emphasize that the underlying mindset, (which is to be sensitive, decisive and involved) is crucial in handling school refusal.



Our movie as presented is important to give recognition to this often hidden problem by youngsters and it also raises awareness to those who are involved with this youngsters at school or otherwise. Please share this movie as much as you can to reach people all over the world.
The youngsters and their families will be grateful, even much more than we are.