



Anna Freud
National Centre for
Children and Families

Addressing emotionally- based school avoidance

For school leaders, senior mental health leads
and classroom teachers

Addressing emotionally-based school avoidance

Emotionally-based school avoidance (EBSA) is a term referring to reduced or non-attendance at school by a child or young person.

Rather than the term 'school refusal', the term EBSA recognises that this avoidance has its root in emotional, mental health or wellbeing issues.

EBSA should not be thought of as a deliberate act of defiance, but instead as a complex issue inextricably linked with mental health and wellbeing.

EBSA also doesn't just mean not attending school entirely. Staff may also observe pupils:

- not going to their classroom
- not staying in class
- not attending some lessons
- avoiding some physical spaces or people.

The 2022 Attendance Audit from the Children's Commissioner found that in Autumn 2021, 1 in 4 children were persistently absent. In 2018/2019, this figure was 1 in 9 – meaning that persistent absence has more than doubled in this time period¹.

Why does EBSA happen?

There is no one reason why children and young people avoid school. It varies by individual, and is usually caused by a combination of various factors and their interaction, rather than a single cause.

Potential risk factors for EBSA can be split into three main categories; the child or young person, the family and home, and the school.

¹ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/cc-voices-of-englands-missing-children-june-2022.pdf>

Some examples of EBSA risk factors could include:

Child / young person	Family / home	School
Anxiety, depression or other mental health concerns	High levels of family stress (including financial stress, conflict or domestic violence)	Bullying
Difficulties with managing and regulating emotions	Changes to the home environment (including divorce, separation or parent/carer illness)	Difficult relationships with staff members
Trauma and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)	Being a young carer	Difficulties making and maintaining friendships, being socially isolated
Low levels of self-confidence or self-esteem	Loss and bereavement	Difficulties in particular subjects
Separation anxiety or attachment issues with a parent/carer	Family history of EBSA	Demanding, pressurised academic environment
Having a special educational need or disability	Poor parental mental health	Transitions: from primary to secondary, or through key stages

What can school staff do?

Although EBSA is a complex issue, positive outcomes are very achievable. There are some strategies outlined here, split into universal approaches and more targeted strategies.

Universal

Take a whole-school approach to mental health and wellbeing

Taking a whole-school approach to mental health has benefits for pupils, staff and families. It means involving all aspects of the school community in promoting and supporting wellbeing. By developing a culture which prioritises wellbeing and is supportive and safe, school staff can reduce the impact of EBSA risk factors.



Resource suggestion

Use the 5 Steps to Mental Health and Wellbeing framework (annafreud.org/5steps) to develop your own whole-school approach to mental health.

Keep an eye out for early indicators and start conversations

As part of regular reviews of attendance data, school staff should try to spot early patterns of absence arising, keeping an eye out for sporadic attendance and lateness.

Other early indicators can include:

- a parent or carer reporting that the child or young person does not want to come to school
- physical signs believed to be linked to stress (e.g. stomach ache, sickness, headache)
- the child or young person often complaining of feeling ill
- behavioural changes or fluctuations e.g. interactions with others, reduced motivation and engagement in learning tasks.

If staff notice these patterns emerging, beginning a dialogue with the child or young person about how they are feeling can help them open up and ask for help.

These conversations can feel difficult or uncomfortable, but will also let a pupil know that they are being listened to and supported.



Resource suggestion

Get some tips and advice on starting the mental health conversation with a child or young person with this [Mentally Healthy Schools guidance](#).

Nurture protective factors

A protective factor is an attribute or condition that can help protect a child or young person against some of the risk factors outlined above, thereby preventing EBSA or reducing its impact.

Developing protective factors isn't something a child or young person can be expected to do alone. Schools play a very important role in developing protective factors in their pupils.

Ways to do this could include:

- building a school culture that recognises all emotional reactions as normal and helps pupils feel safe to express their emotions
- supporting the child or young person in developing effective emotional regulation strategies
- providing quiet or safe spaces for pupils to access if they are experiencing intense emotions
- providing opportunities for pupils to contribute to decision-making in the school, helping them feel that their voices are valued and heard
- working to reduce everyday stressors in the classroom for pupils who easily become overwhelmed
- checking in regularly with pupils to see whether any agreed adaptations or strategies are working and useful, and adjusting if not.



Resource suggestion

Open up conversations about mental health in the classroom with the [Talking Mental Health animation and accompanying teacher toolkit](#).

Positive and supportive communication with families

Ensuring that parents and carers feel connected and involved with the school is key to support children and young people's mental health.

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, parents and carers may have disengaged from the school community. Some parents and carers may also have had difficult times at school themselves when they were younger, and their confidence in the ability of the school to support their child may be low.

By finding ways to involve them in school life and communicating with them regularly, you will build parents' and carers' trust in the school.

If the family of the child or young person trusts that the school will be able to support their child, they will be more likely to encourage the child to attend school, as they know that they will be cared for and supported.



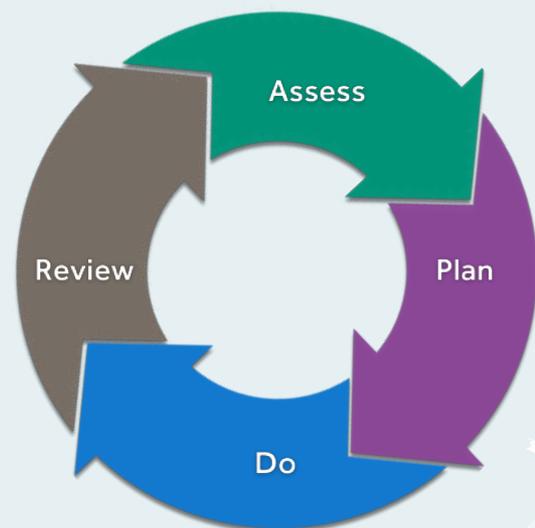
Resource suggestion

Explore a range of innovative ways that schools can successfully build relationships with parents and carers in the [Engaging with all parents and carers booklet](#).

Targeted

As well as working on universal approaches to mental health and wellbeing, it's also important for school staff to develop a planned process around EBSA for children and young people who require more targeted support.

You may be familiar with the assess/plan/do/review model, which is laid out in the [SEND code of practice](#). If not, the SENCo in your school will know it. It is a very useful framework for working with a pupil experiencing EBSA.



Below is an example with suggested actions under each step. The cycle can be repeated as many times as needed to help the child or young person progress.

Assess

- Keep an eye out for early indicators of EBSA in pupils and act quickly.
- Work with pupils to identify the risk factors they are experiencing which may be causing EBSA. [The Child Outcomes Research Consortium \(CORC\)'s website](#) hosts a number of different tools to help you do this.

Plan

- Co-produce a return to school action plan with the pupil, family and school all involved in the process. Agree a date of review, and share the plan with all parties involved. If the student is finding the idea of returning to school particularly difficult, the plan could focus on smaller steps – like meeting a friend from school or completing a piece of work – to begin the process of returning to school
- Work with the child or young person on a return to school pupil support plan, detailing the support they can expect when they come back to school. Again, share this with all parties.

Do

- Maintain good communication with the family and pupil during the return to school – for example, supporting the completion of school work at home and sharing feedback on the work
- Consider developing specific family support groups based around EBSA, so that parents and carers with children having difficulties can meet and support one another.

Review

- Monitor the progress made and adjust the plan for the next steps
- Further consultation with other agencies may be needed.

Case study

At the Anna Freud Centre, our WEST team often work with young people experiencing emotionally-based school avoidance. This case study from their work gives an example of how schools can work with others to tackle EBSA.

The young person referred to WEST was experiencing suicidal thoughts as well as high levels of anxiety around her academic performance, as her GCSEs were approaching and she was not attending school. The young person had received a diagnosis of ASD when she was 12, which contributed to her emotionally-based school non-attendance.

To address the suicidal thoughts, a safety plan was created and shared with the wider system around the young person, including the school and family. A named person in school was identified to support the young person and her parents, and to notice and communicate when her mood was decreasing.

Intervention sessions using cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) helped the young person better understand her anxiety, by identifying triggers, challenging unhelpful thoughts, and completing a sensory profile. Additionally, a 'thermometer' was created and used to support her to apply different anxiety reduction strategies to in the moment experiences.

The young person, with the support of her parents and members of staff worked through a 'stepladder'; a graded hierarchy of exposure to the feared situation – school. A safe space was identified in school where the young person initially transitioned to from home. This was then followed by the young person transitioning from this space to lessons with her peers.

Through graded exposure and use of relaxation and grounding strategies, the young person was gradually able to transition to full attendance in the classroom. As she built her confidence in returning to the classroom, she was able to rediscover her enthusiasm and passion for learning. Her school attendance was 100% prior to taking her GCSE exams.

Supportive school staff were essential to this plan to enable the young person to feel understood, for her to know that her safe space was always available and for her to know that the school staff would support her to make the necessary adjustments to achieve the plan.

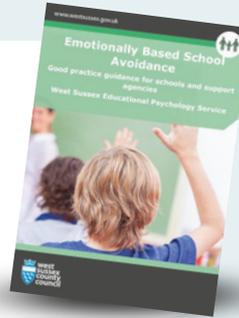
A portfolio of work was completed at the end of the intervention, and relevant aspects were shared with parents and the professional network to ensure that the strategies she found helpful were understood and continued beyond the end of the intervention.

Further resources

A number of local authority education support teams have produced detailed guidance on EBSA, which can be very useful for schools wanting to learn more about addressing it.

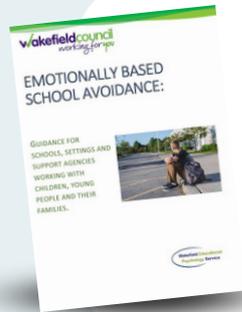
West Sussex Educational Psychology Service (2022):

[What is emotionally-based school avoidance?](#)



Wakefield Education Psychology Service (2021):

[Emotionally based school avoidance: guidance for schools, settings and support agencies working with children, young people and their families](#)



Solihull Borough Council (2020):

[Emotionally-Based School Non-attendance: Guide for Professionals Solihull Community Educational Psychology Service](#)



Bromley Education Matters (February 2022):

[Emotionally-Based School Avoidance Documents, London Borough of Bromley](#)



Staffordshire County Council (September 2020):

[Emotionally Based School Avoidance: Guidance for Educational Settings](#)

