Guidance for Schools

Hertfordshire

Emotionally Based School Avoidance: Executive Summary

ISL Integrated Services for Learning

working together locally

Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA): Guidance for Schools – Executive Summary

Purpose

This document is an executive summary of the Guidance for Schools on Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA). The longer document includes additional details and has a toolkit of appendices to support your work with children and young people (CYPs) experiencing EBSA.

The full document has been written by a group of Educational Psychologists (EPs), in collaboration with other professionals from Integrated Services for Learning (ISL):

- the Attendance team;
- the Specialist Advisory Teachers (SATs) for Speech, Language, Communication and Autism (SEND SAS);
- the Education Support for Medical Absence (ESMA) team;
- DSPL8.

The **full guidance** for Schools on Emotionally Based School Avoidance can be accessed by contacting your school's Educational Psychologist.

EBSA is a complex issue and the body of evidence is still developing. The executive summary and the full document are based on current available research.

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Introduction to Emotionally Based School Avoidance

What is EBSA?

Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) describes children and young people (CYPs) who experience difficulties attending school due to emotional distress (West Sussex County Council, 2018). The degree of school avoidance can vary from minor to prolonged absences. EBSA is estimated to affect 1-2% of CYPs in school[1], and excludes situations where attendance difficulties are due to physical illnesses, parents withdrawing the CYP from the school roll, societal/family circumstances such as homelessness or running away or the CYP finding more preferable ways to spend the school day.

There are many different reasons why children develop EBSA and strategies that works for one CYP may not help another. Schools often need to address multiple and interacting factors when supporting children with EBSA.

Early intervention is recognised as the most effective solution (Reid, 2002) supported by early identification.

Understanding EBSA

Everyone experiences anxiety and often anxiety is a healthy and helpful response to a situation. People feel anxious when they believe they are under threat. When someone thinks something bad is going to happen, their bodies release adrenaline which helps them physically prepare to deal with the threat by running away or fighting. These chemicals cause physical sensations in their body, such as sweating, a dry mouth, a fluttering tummy and a fast heartbeat. This is the fight or flight response.

Sometimes we think situations are dangerous when they are not and, because we think we are in danger, our body produces adrenaline. When we feel anxious sensations in our bodies, it is natural to want to avoid the triggering situation. However, every time we avoid the thing that we are worried about, it reinforces the belief that we need to avoid it to make ourselves feel safe. We do not get the chance to learn that we are able to cope or that the situation is as bad as we think it will be.

The diagram below (taken from West Sussex EBSA Guidance) shows how anxious feelings about school can lead to school avoidance.
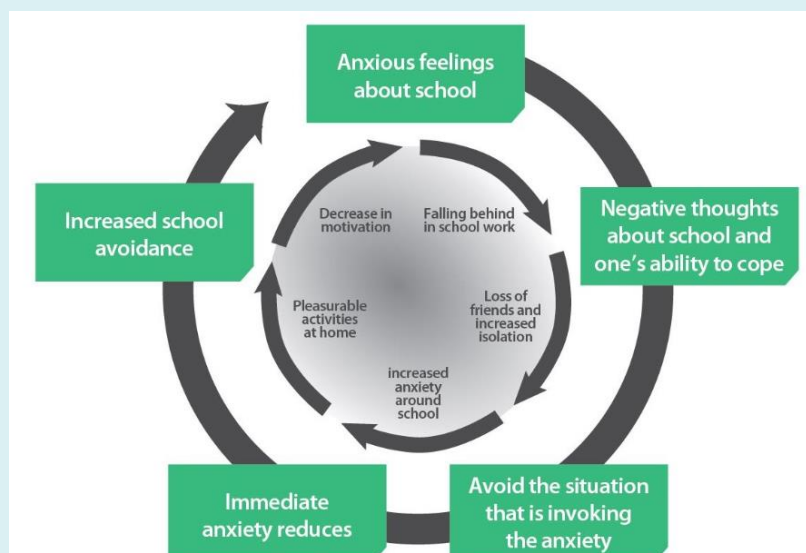
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Guiding Principles for Supporting EBSA

Intervene Early

Parents, teachers, support staff and other front-line staff should be aware of the early signs for EBSA. Schools are recommended to begin monitoring attendance on or around 94%.

Discussions with the CYP, parent/carer and key members of staff should be undertaken as soon as concern is raised to explore why the CYP is so worried, triggering events, individual concerns, etc.

Based on this, school in collaboration with parents and the CYP should agree an Action Plan for return to school with targets and review dates.

If initial attempts to get the CYP back into school have not been successful after the first review, involve relevant external professionals to access additional advice.

Work with the family throughout

As soon as concerns are raised, a designated member of school staff should reach out and establish contact with the parents/carers.

Staff should be mindful that parents/carers may feel that they will be judged or be in trouble if their child is experiencing EBSA, so should be sensitive to their feelings.

On-going two-way dialogue with a member of staff at school, in order to share any concerns/developments on both sides.

Ensure there is a focus on the positives as well as the issues/barriers.

It may be appropriate to have an agreed expectation for format and frequency of contact as well as realistic response times.

Actively involve the pupil

CYPs should be invited to share their thoughts and feelings about what makes school so concerning.

Involve the CYP in the process of identifying what strategies can support them to manage in school. They may have ideas that adults would not have thought of.

CYPs can be supported to be directly involved in meetings, when this is appropriate.

Pupils are more likely to engage in an action plan if they feel they play an active and important part in the process.

Develop a personalised, holistic action plan

Develop a plan that addresses the specific issues identified during the assessment process.

The action plan should takes into account the context of the school and relationships within that environment, family issues, as well as the individual CYP's personal concerns and anxieties.

Intervention often works better if the plan recognises and builds on the CYP's strengths.

Review the action plan regularly

Accept that the journey may not be smooth and that progress is likely to change daily.

Plans may need to be reviewed on a weekly or fortnightly basis. This time period may increase as the pupil becomes more settled in school.

At the start of the plan, the CYP is likely to show more distress, and everyone should be aware and prepared for this.

It can be hard when progress is slow or when things seem to be backwards. This can be particularly apparent after a school holiday, period of illness or even just a weekend.

Whole-School Preventative and Proactive Approaches

It is important that schools take a proactive approach to understanding and managing EBSA, as part of a whole-school initiative to monitoring attendance and promote emotional wellbeing.

Transition is a particularly difficult time for CYP at risk of EBSA so should be carefully monitored and supported. Robust transition plans are needed for all CYPs, with additional support put in place for vulnerable CYPs (e.g. those who already have identified anxiety, those with autism etc.)

Best practice includes schools having:

- Clear systems for the **early identification** of attendance difficulties;
- Written materials available for parents on the issue of EBSA;
- Staff trained in the issue of EBSA;
- An identified member of SMT to lead on and coordinate the response to EBSA (including collating relevant information, gaining the CYP's views and facilitating meetings);
- A focus on **early intervention.**

Schools must pay attention to their **statutory responsibilities** with regards to attendance – schools must inform the local authority of any pupils who are regularly absent from school, have irregular attendance, or have 10 or more consecutive day's absence without the school's permission. Schools are also under a safeguarding duty, under section 175 of the Education Act 2002 to investigate any unexplained absences. In terms of non-statutory responsibilities, the government expects schools and local authorities to:

- Promote good attendance and reduce absence, including persistent absence;
- Ensure every pupil has access to full-time education to which they are entitled; and,
- Act early to address patterns of absence.

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Identifying CYPs at risk of EBSA

EBSA may start gradually, which means it can be hard to spot when things are beginning to go wrong. It is easier to make change if you intervene early, at the first sign of difficulties.

Particular attention and monitoring should happen for CYPs on the **autism spectrum** as they are more vulnerable to anxiety than typically developing children. CYPs with autism are more likely to experience higher levels of general anxiety daily as they must navigate a complicated and often confusing sensory and social world. In the school setting, even the smallest changes can trigger anxiety, for example, moving desk or a change in teacher.

One way of identifying students at risk of EBSA is to consider any risk and protective factors. Protective/resilience factors reduce the negative impact of a risk factor on problem outcomes and are associated with a lower likelihood of problem outcomes. These can be understood in terms of factors which either 'push' the CYP towards attending school or 'pull' them away from attending school or staying at home. Risk factors are associated with a higher likelihood of problem outcomes. It is helpful to identify both risk and resilience factors so that risk factors are managed or remediated wherever possible and resilience factors can be fully utilised/built upon.

Risk factors may be considered within the domains of school, family and CYP:

School factors:	*Family factors:*	*CYP factors:*
e.g. Bullying, subject difficulties, transition, structure of the school day, academic demand, journey to school, exams, size of school, relationship difficulties.	e.g. Change in family dynamic; parental health problems; overprotective parenting style; complex family interactions; loss/ bereavement; family stress; family history of EBSA; being a young carer.	e.g. Temperamental style; fear of failure; lack of self-confidence; physical illness; age; undiagnosed learning needs; separation anxiety; traumatic events/ ACES; feeling overwhelmed; medical difficulties.

Protective/ resilience factors may consider both areas of strength for the CYP and aspects of the school environment that could be developed to promote attendance, for example:

Developing CYP's **ambition, aspiration and motivation**	Increasing CYP's **confidence, self-esteem and self-efficacy**	Developing CYP's feelings of **safety, security and a sense of belonging**	CYP having **positive experiences** where they can succeed	CYP having **positive relationships** with peers and/or staff
CYP feels **listened to and understood**	CYP and staff **understand the relationship** between thoughts, feelings and behaviours	School have a **willingness to work in partnership with others** to support the CYP	**School support parents i**n developing their skills and understanding	Flexible approaches are used in school, including a focus on **remaining child-centred.**

It is important to identify the complexity and uniqueness of every EBSA situation so that approaches to support can be tailored to the specific nature/ circumstances of each situation accordingly.

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Assessing CYPs Experiencing EBSA

It is important to gather information as part of the **Assess – Plan – Do – Review** cycle, so staff can identify what would be most helpful for the particular difficulties that the CYP is experiencing. One member of staff should be identified to be the key contact and support for the CYP and their family and be responsible for gathering all the information.

Points to consider when gathering information from the CYP:

- Information gathering should be done by a member of staff the CYP knows well and feels comfortable with;
- Ask open questions (e.g. 'how do you feel about…?') and 'how' questions rather than 'why';
- You can use scaling or card sorting activities (which are available as part of the full guide) to identify triggers (e.g. things in the school environment, particular lessons, routines), to support the conversation.

Points to consider when gathering information from parents/carers:

- Identify what the CYP is good at outside of school;
- Ask about home life and routines;
- Encourage parents/carers to share information about any significant changes to the CYP's life;
- Consider friendships, both inside and outside school;
- Ask what parents/carers think is triggering the school refusal;
- If the CYP is not attending school, ask what about the impact on the CYP and the rest of the family.

Points to consider when gathering information from staff:

- Find out what the CYP's strengths are and what is going well;
- Ask if staff have noticed any changes in the CYP;
- Consider how the CYP interacts with peers in the lessons;
- Ask what difficulties does the CYP have (e.g. with the learning, attention/focus, signs of emotional distress);
- Establish what support is already in place for the CYP and its impact.

A member of staff could also do observations of the CYP in different lessons.

This information should be brought together to make sense of what is happening and what could help and used to devise an **action plan.** This should be jointly created with the relevant people (the CYP, their family and school staff), and regularly reviewed.

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Strategies to support CYPs with EBSA

Strategies that are likely to be relevant for all children with EBSA:

- Allocate the CYP key adults in school;
- Have clear consistent routines for warmly welcoming the CYP to school;
- Ensure the CYP knows what will happen during the day, including what will happen in unstructured times;
- Enable readiness for learning by introducing calming activities at the start of the day;
- Teach the CYP how to recognise, label and self-regulate their feelings;
- Proactively adapt the environment to reduce triggers for anxiety;
- Make a plan in advance with the CYP about what will happen if they become anxious;
- Build the CYP's confidence in their ability to manage their anxiety;
- Develop the CYP's motivation to be in school;
- Keep in contact with students who are not attending school at all;
- Share the document "Emotionally Based School Avoidance: A Guide for Parents and Carers" with families when it becomes available.

In addition, schools will need to introduce strategies that address the specific reasons why the CYP wants to avoid school. Kearney and Silverman (1990)[1] developed a model which suggests the reasons why CYPs are reluctant to attend school can generally be categorised into four main areas:

The CYP wants to avoid things at school that make them feel anxious or sad.	The CYP wants to avoid difficult social situations or being evaluated.	The CYP wants to gain attention from parents / caregivers.	The CYP wants to gain tangible rewards outside of school.

A CYP may experience just one or a combination of these factors, and their influence may also change over time. For example, a CYP may initially refuse to attend school because of social anxiety. However, once at home, they may discover that they prefer playing computer games to being at school.

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[1] "A Preliminary Analysis of a Functional Model of Assessment and Treatment for School Refusal Behavior", Kearney and Silverman (1990)

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Strategies to try when being at school makes the CYP feel overwhelmingly anxious or sad.

- Address the specific worries or difficulties identified during assessment e.g. sensory difficulties, learning needs, bullying etc.;
- Promote strategies to regulate and manage this anxiety.

Strategies to try when the CYP wants to avoid difficult social situations or situations where they feel evaluated

- Teach social skills and mindful acceptance;
- Help children develop their self-esteem;
- Teach the CYP how to check for thinking errors;
- Teach social problem solving.

Strategies to try when school avoidance is around the need for attention and contact with parent / carers.

- Have an organised "meet and greet", with a routine for saying goodbye to the parent/carer;
- Introduce a transitional object;
- Encourage the parent/carer to manage their own anxiety
- Consider referring to other agencies if the family needs support;
- If CYP has a background of trauma or abuse, consider allocating a "key adult" who takes on the role of an additional attachment figure.

Strategies to try when school avoidance is reinforced by the CYP engaging in pleasurable and rewarding activities while they are at home during the school day (e.g. gaming)

- Encourage and support the parents/carers to set limits on their child's behaviour.

Conclusion

It is important to remember that EBSA is a complex issue and what works for one CYP will not necessarily work for another.

If you would like more support for a CYP in your setting experiencing EBSA, please speak to your contact EP to access the full version of the document. This document also explains how other services (including the Attendance team, SATs, ESMA team and EP service) can support.

Acknowledgements