



EMOTIONALLY BASED SCHOOL AVOIDANCE

Overview

This document provides an overview of what we mean by Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) and how schools can work with parents and children/young people.



Cambridgeshire
County Council

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SEND SERVICES 0-25

Huntingdonshire area
SEND0-25HUNTS@cambridgeshire.gov.uk

East Cambridgeshire and Fenland Area
SEND0-25ECF@cambridgeshire.gov.uk

South Cambridgeshire and Cambridge City
Area
SEND0-25SCC@cambridgeshire.gov.uk

What is Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA)?

Emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA) is an umbrella term used to describe when a child or young person struggles with attending school, or aspects of school, due to emotional distress, anxiety, or fear. Areas of difficulties that may affect EBSA include:

- mental health difficulties e.g. anxiety, social anxiety, health anxiety, low mood and obsessive-compulsive disorder
- social difficulties e.g. bullying, isolation
- factors in the home/community
- sensory overload or
- physical and/or health issues
- motivational issues (which may relate to mental health).

Children and young people who are described as experiencing EBSA often have prolonged absences from school which usually increase over time. If patterns of EBSA are recognised early, the child or young person may be attending school but avoiding particular people or lessons. Typically, it takes children and young people more effort and time to re-integrate into school when they have had longer periods of time away from the school community. However much of this depends on the nature of support given to children and their families once the child has been recognised as having difficulties relating to EBSA.

Why this definition?

The terminology relating to children/young people's school anxieties has undergone a number of changes in recent years. Within Cambridgeshire schools, particularly those that have had Cambridgeshire Therapeutic Thinking (CTT) training and/or Recovery through Relationships training, there is an increased focus on understanding the function of children/young people's behaviours by examining their underlying emotions, situations, or the wider systems affecting them. Previous definitions placed more emphasis on the term 'refusal' (Emotionally based school refusal - EBSR), which inadvertently implied that the young person has control over the school non-attendance, or that they are simply choosing not to attend. You may also see or hear reference to the term Emotionally based school non-attendance (EBSNA). However, this suggests that the term is only applicable to children who are not attending school at all. Different professionals may use slightly different terminology, according to what they feel most comfortable using. Whatever the terms are that are used, the current approach in Cambridgeshire is to focus on understanding the underlying reasons for the child or young person not feeling able to attend school, or aspects of their school environment, hence why the terminology emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA) will be used.

Understanding children and young people with EBSA

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 period.

For children with EBSA, school avoidance becomes the only coping strategy that they can use to avoid the emotional distress associated with being in school, in lessons, and amongst their peers. For some, their avoidance strategy may be to miss lessons; whilst others might have difficulty attending for longer stretches. By understanding that avoidance has become their coping strategy, it is possible to consider the factors that may be contributing to their anxiety and to plan alternative pathways for them to re-engage in school.

It may be helpful to consider EBSA as being on a spectrum where children and young people may experience a range of difficulties. There may be a gradual shift in avoiding aspects of the school day. Typically, there are early signs of anxiety or distress in young people who develop EBSA. However these signs are sometimes either dismissed as being 'a phase' or regarded as part of the young person's characteristics (e.g., being shy or withdrawn).

Underlying reasons why EBSA may develop

Understanding the underlying reasons why children and young people develop EBSA is complex, yet key to developing a way forward. Often there is a complex interplay within several factors at home, school and within the child themselves. Some of the more common examples are:

- Social anxiety - fear of ridicule, isolation, social rejection, loneliness, bullying, feeling different.
- Anxiety around learning - fear of failure, letting others down, feeling unable to keep up, worrying about specific topics or teachers.
- Health anxiety - fear of not being well, difficulty coping with physiological effects of being in school (e.g. sensory sensitivities), fear of loss or change.
- Worries that related to things in the home – worries about separating from parents, parental health concerns (physical/mental or perceived illness), fears leaving a single parent, fears about a parent or sibling's safety.

The cycle of avoidance and anxiety maintenance

Anxiety is a natural response to stressful situations, and it is not uncommon for children to experience anxiety at some point in their lives. Avoiding anxiety-provoking situations can provide temporary relief from anxiety. However, it can also result in the maintenance of anxiety which can worsen the child's quality of life and emotional well-being in the long term. When a child avoids a fear, it reinforces the belief that the fear is dangerous and must be avoided. By behaving in this way, the child's anxious feelings are not challenged or tackled. Therefore, when they are required to do something that worries them in the future, they lack the confidence and experience to deal with these emotions and feelings. Sometimes this process is referred to as an anxiety maintenance cycle (Figure 1). In the long-term, children who rely on this approach to manage anxiety sometimes find themselves avoiding a range of different situations to avoid their anxious thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations. Over time, avoiding the fear can make the anxiety worse, as the child's world becomes more restricted, and their fear becomes more powerful.

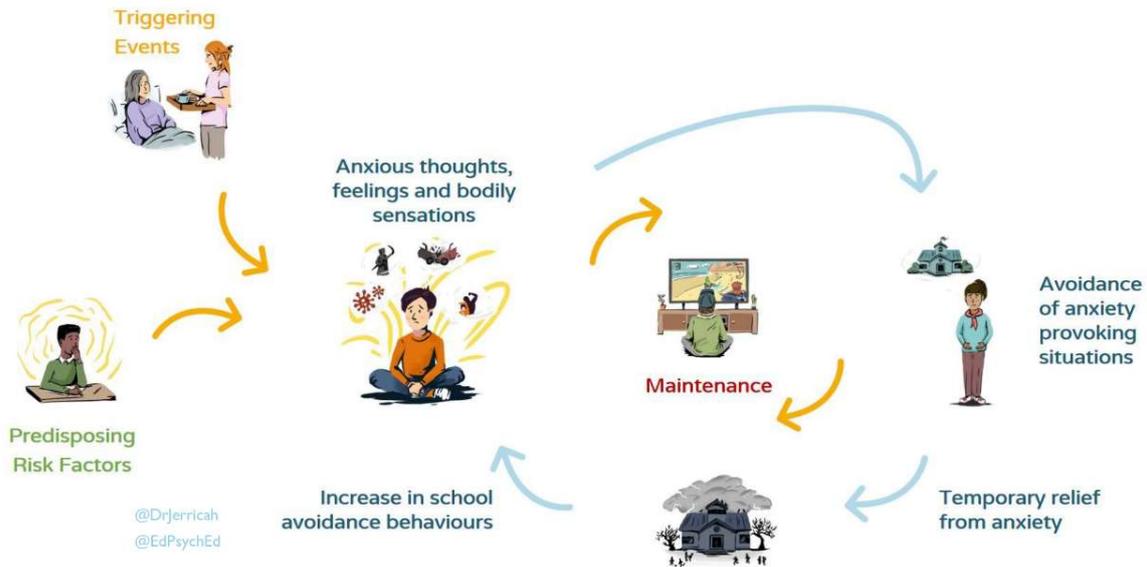


Figure 1: EBSA Anxiety maintenance cycles (developed by Ed Psych Ed)

To break the cycle and move forward, a holistic view of the child/young person, their school experiences, and their family life should be understood. School staff, parents and the child/young person will need to work together to feel heard prior to planning a return to school (if a child is no longer attending school on-site). It's important to remember that school-avoidant behaviour is not a choice that the child is making, but rather a way for them to cope with their emotions and experiences.

'Push away' and 'Pull to' Factors

'Push away' and 'pull to' factors can be an important way of understanding why children/young people avoid school (or other situations that cause them anxiety). Figure 2 can be used to help adults to consider what factors may push children into avoidance strategies and away from school (i.e., Risk Factors) and what factors may help pull them back towards school and help them feel able to manage their anxiety outside the security of their home (i.e., Resiliency Factors).

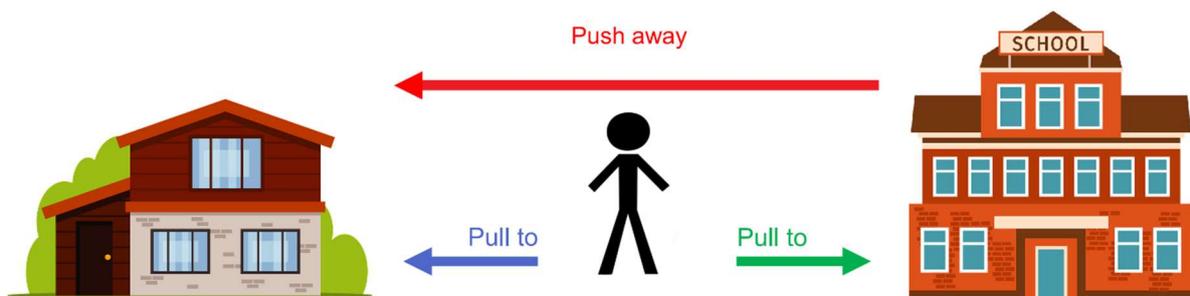


Figure 2: 'Push away' and 'Pull to' factors.

For children and young people experiencing EBSA, it is important to explore the ‘push away’ and ‘pull to’ factors for any individual within both the home and school environments.

At school:

- The ‘**Push away**’ factors could be some of the things that prevent the child or young person from feeling like they can attend school. For instance, they may experience higher levels of anxiety or stress getting ready in the morning or on the journey to school. They may also be struggling with academic challenges or feeling like they don't fit in with their peers. These negative experiences can cause them to feel like they don't want to go to school.
- The ‘**Pull to**’ factors, on the other hand, refer to the positive experiences that can motivate the child or young person to attend school. These can include things like feeling connected to their peers, enjoying certain classes or extracurricular activities, or having a supportive teacher who can help them feel comfortable and safe at school.

At home:

- The ‘**Pull to**’ factors at home may include avoiding anxiety provoking situations and negative outcomes, spending more time with their caregivers and engaging in positive experiences at home. Overall, the child or young person may feel safer and more emotionally contained within the home.
- The ‘**Push away**’ from school factors within the home can include negative experiences or emotions that the child or young person may be facing within the household, such as parental illness. For example, they may feel something might happen to their unwell parent while they are away and then not want to leave them as a result.

How can schools work with parents and young people to help?

All schools should be able to make reasonable adjustments over time to ensure that children are supported to understand their anxiety, their triggers, and their physical/emotional responses. If a child/young person is not attending school consistently, school staff have a responsibility to plan and send work home for them, mark any work that they receive and communicate regularly with the student and their family.

School staff should consider their universal (whole school) approaches as well as specific or targeted strategies. In Cambridgeshire, schools can refer to the **EBSA toolkit** for further guidance and resources around developing whole school and specific/targeted EBSA provision.

School staff should meet with parents and young people who are experiencing EBSA regularly. Often, this is co-ordinated by the school SENCO (Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator). However, there are times when this type of support is given by a pastoral team member, particularly if the child/young person is not thought to have any other special educational needs or disabilities (SEND). It is important that children and young people’s needs are understood and assessed using a framework that focuses on understanding the child/young person’s anxiety and any elements that impact on this.

EBSA and the Law

Key documents:

[Working together to improve school attendance \(applies from 19 August 2024\) \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#) – **statutory guidance**

[Summary of responsibilities where a mental health issue is affecting attendance \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

[Support for pupils where a mental health issue is affecting attendance: effective practice examples \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

Key points raised in statutory guidance:

- This guidance applies to schools, academy trusts, governing bodies and local authorities.
- This guidance applies to **any** pupils presenting with any social, emotional or mental health needs that are affecting their attendance. It is **not only** for pupils who have a diagnosis, or a disability or special educational need.
- Improving attendance is **everybody's business** – at all stages of improving attendance, schools and partners should work in partnership with pupils and parents **collaboratively** to remove any barriers to attendance by building **strong and trusting relationships** and **working together** to put the right support in place. All partners should work together to:

Expect

- Aspire to high standards of attendance from all pupils and parents and build a culture where all can, and want to, be in school and ready to learn .

Monitor

- Rigorously use attendance data to identify patterns of poor attendance (at individual and cohort level) as soon as possible so all parties can work together to resolve them before they become entrenched.

Listen and Understand

- When a pattern is spotted, discuss with pupils and parents to listen to and understand barriers to attendance and agree how all parties can work together to resolve them.

Facilitate support

- Remove barriers in school and help pupils and parents to access the support they need to overcome the barriers outside of school.

Formalise support

- Where absence persists and voluntary support is not working or not being engaged with, partners should work together to explain the consequences clearly and ensure support is also in place to help families to respond. This may include formalising support through an attendance contract or education supervision order.

Enforce

- **Where all other avenues have been exhausted** and support is not working or not being engaged with, enforce attendance through statutory intervention; a penalty notice in line with the National Framework or prosecution to protect the pupil's right to an education.

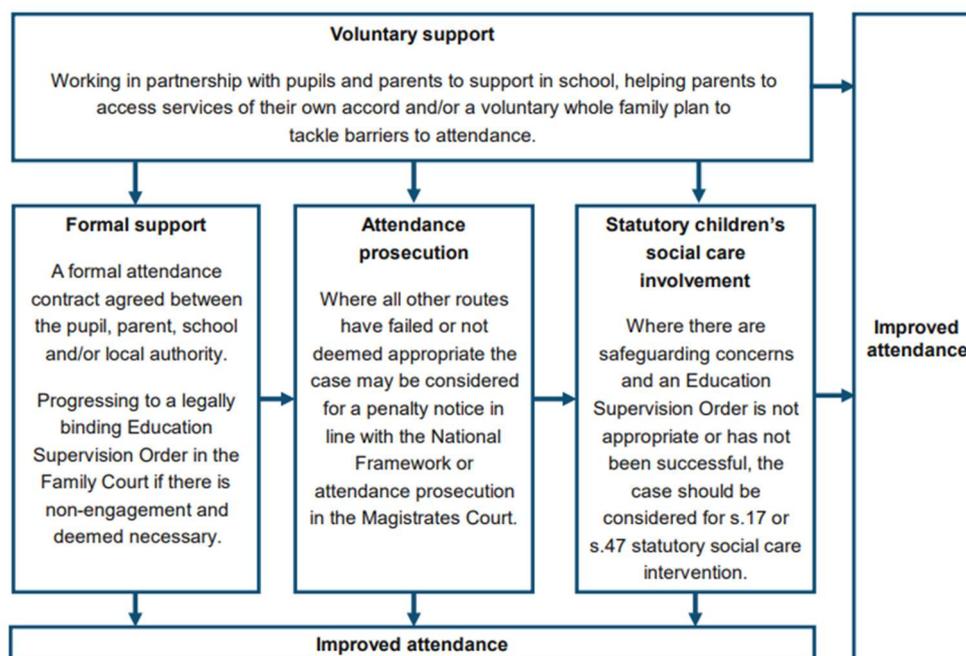
Expectations of Schools:

- Build strong relationships and work jointly with families to understand and address any barriers to attendance.
- Be particularly mindful of pupils absent from school due to mental or physical ill health or support their special educational needs and/or disabilities, and provide them with additional support.
- Where absence intensifies, so should the support provided.
- Where voluntary support has not been effective and/or has not been engaged with, formal support should be put in place in the form of an attendance contract or an education supervision order. **Enforcing attendance through legal intervention should be a last resort after all other avenues have been tried.**
- Have a designated senior leader with overall responsibility for championing and improving attendance in school (**Senior Attendance Champion**), liaising with pupils, parents and external agencies where needed, and regularly monitor and evaluate progress and the efficacy of the school's strategies and processes.
- Facilitate any relevant pastoral support and consider adjustments to practice and policies to help meet the needs of pupils who are struggling to attend school, as well as making formal reasonable adjustments. Any adjustments should be agreed by, and regularly reviewed with the pupil and their parents.
- Consider whether a time-limited phased return to school would be appropriate, for example for those affected by anxious feelings about school attendance.
- Where absence escalates and pupils miss 10% or more school (equivalent to 1 day or more a fortnight across a full school year), schools and local authorities are expected to work together to put additional targeted support in place to

remove barriers to attendance and reengage these pupils. In doing so, schools should sensitively consider some of the reasons for the absence and **understand that importance of school as a place of safety and support for children who might be facing difficulties, rather than reaching immediately for punitive approaches.**

- Particular focus should be given by all partners to pupils who are absent from school more than they are present (e.g., those missing 50% or more of school). They are likely to need more intensive support.

Providing support first before attendance legal intervention



Attendance contracts

An attendance contract is a formal written agreement between a parent and either the school (with the exception of independent schools and non-maintained special schools) or local authority to address irregular attendance at school or alternative provision. An attendance contract is not legally binding but allows a more formal route to secure engagement with support where a voluntary early help plan has not worked or is not deemed appropriate. An attendance contract is not a punitive tool, it is intended to provide support and offer an alternative to prosecution. Parents cannot be compelled to enter an attendance contract, and they cannot be agreed in a parent's absence.

There is no obligation on the school or local authority to offer an attendance contract, and it may not be appropriate in every instance, but an attendance contract should always be explored before moving forward to an education supervision order or prosecution.

The aim from the outset should be for the parent(s), and the pupil where they are old enough, the school and the local authority to work in partnership.

Attendance contracts do not have a minimum or maximum duration. Each individual attendance contract should set out the duration it will be in place, and most are for between 3 and 12 months but can be longer if needed.

For further guidance on what an attendance contract might contain, refer to p 49 of guidance.

For an outline of more formalised support arrangements, including Education Supervision Orders (ESOs) and National Framework for penalty notices, please refer to pp. 51-61 of the guidance.

Please note: support is defined as any activity intended to improve the pupil's attendance, not including issuing a penalty notice or prosecution. As part of this consideration, schools and local authorities should consider what suitable forms of support are currently available in school and where necessary from other services and agencies in the area. They should then decide whether any of those things are appropriate in the individual cases and for those that are appropriate, whether they have been provided previously or could be provided now instead of taking legal action. The local authority's decision on whether sufficient support has been provided before issuing a penalty notice should be treated as final.

Attendance and absence codes

Code I: Illness (not medical or dental appointment)

The pupil is unable to attend due to illness (**both physical and mental health related**). Schools should advise parents to notify them on the first day the child is unable to attend due to illness. This code is classified for statistical purposes as an authorised absence.

Schools are not expected to routinely request that parents provide medical evidence to support illness absences. Schools should only request reasonable medical evidence in cases where they need clarification to accurately record absence in the attendance register – i.e. making a decision that code I is the absence code that accurately describes the reason the pupil is not in school for the session in question. In the majority of cases a parent's notification that their child is too ill to attend school will be that evidence and can be accepted without question or concern. Only where the school has genuine and reasonable doubt about the authenticity of the illness should medical evidence be requested to support the absence.

Where medical evidence is deemed necessary, schools should not be rigid about the form of evidence requested and should speak to the family about what evidence is available. **Schools should be mindful that requesting additional medical evidence unnecessarily places pressure on health professionals, their staff and their appointment system, particularly if the illness is one that does not require treatment by a health professional.** Where a parent cannot provide evidence in the form requested but can provide other evidence, schools should take this into account. Where a parent cannot provide any written evidence the school should have a conversation with the parent and pupil, if appropriate, which may in itself serve as the necessary evidence to record the absence.