



# EMOTIONALLY BASED SCHOOL AVOIDANCE

## Parent Guidance

This guide offers information and advice to the parents or carers of children and young people who are experiencing emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA).



Cambridgeshire  
County Council

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### **SEND SERVICES 0-25**

Huntingdonshire area

[SEND0-25HUNTS@cambridgeshire.gov.uk](mailto:SEND0-25HUNTS@cambridgeshire.gov.uk)

East Cambridgeshire and Fenland Area

[SEND0-25ECF@cambridgeshire.gov.uk](mailto:SEND0-25ECF@cambridgeshire.gov.uk)

South Cambridgeshire and Cambridge City  
Area

[SEND0-25SCC@cambridgeshire.gov.uk](mailto:SEND0-25SCC@cambridgeshire.gov.uk)

## **What is Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA)?**

Emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA) is when a child or young person struggles with attending school, or aspects of school, due to emotional distress, anxiety, or fear. Feelings of overwhelm or anxiety about attending school can lead to avoidance behaviours, such as crying, or refusing to go to school. The child or young person may also express physical symptoms of anxiety (for example, tummy aches and feeling sick). With EBSA, these feelings and avoidance behaviours are repeated over a prolonged period of time, rather than a one-off emotional experience.

It's important to understand that EBSA is not a behaviour that children choose, but rather a coping mechanism that they use to manage their emotions. As a parent or carer, it's important to offer support and understanding to your child and work together to identify the root causes of their emotional distress. This guide aims to offer parents/carers suggestions of ways you can help your child. It also discusses ways that school staff and other professionals may work with you and your child.

By working with your child, school staff, and other supportive professionals, you can help your child develop coping strategies and provide them with the support they need to overcome their challenges and feel more comfortable attending school. Remember, you are not alone in this, and there is help available.

This guide frequently uses the term 'child', but this may also refer to older children, teenagers, or young people. Similarly, this guide uses the word parent and sometimes uses the word carer; these terms refer to anyone involved in a parenting role.

## **Understanding your child's anxiety**

Anxiety is a natural response to stressful situations, and it is not uncommon for children to experience anxiety at some point in their lives. Anxiety is a feeling of worry, fear, or unease and can manifest in different ways in children. Here are some common signs that your child may be experiencing anxiety:

- Avoidance of certain people, places, or activities.
- Excessive worry and fears about everyday situations.
- Difficulty sleeping or nightmares.
- Physical symptoms such as headaches, stomach aches and/or sweating.
- Excessive distress when separated from parents or caregivers.

## **The cycle of avoidance and anxiety maintenance**

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. In the long-term, children who rely on this approach to manage anxiety sometimes find themselves avoiding a range of different situations in order to avoid their anxious thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations.

For example, if a child has a fear of dogs, avoiding dogs may provide temporary relief from anxiety. However, it can also reinforce the belief that dogs are dangerous and must be avoided. This can lead to an increase in avoidance behaviours, such as avoiding parks or streets where dogs are present, which can limit the child's opportunities for social and physical activities. Additionally, the child may experience anxious thoughts and feelings whenever they encounter a dog, which can lead to increased bodily sensations of anxiety, such as a rapid heartbeat or sweating.

Over time, avoiding the fear can make the anxiety worse, as the child's world becomes more restricted, and their fear becomes more powerful. To break the cycle of avoidance and maintenance of anxiety, it's important to gradually face the fear and learn healthy coping strategies to manage the anxiety. This can involve having the support of trusted adults and professionals in the school, practicing coping strategies, and gradually exposing the child to the fear in a safe and supportive environment. By facing the fear and learning to manage anxiety, the child can regain control and engage in a variety of opportunities and experiences. The figure below should help to give you a visual representation of how anxiety maintenance cycles can develop.

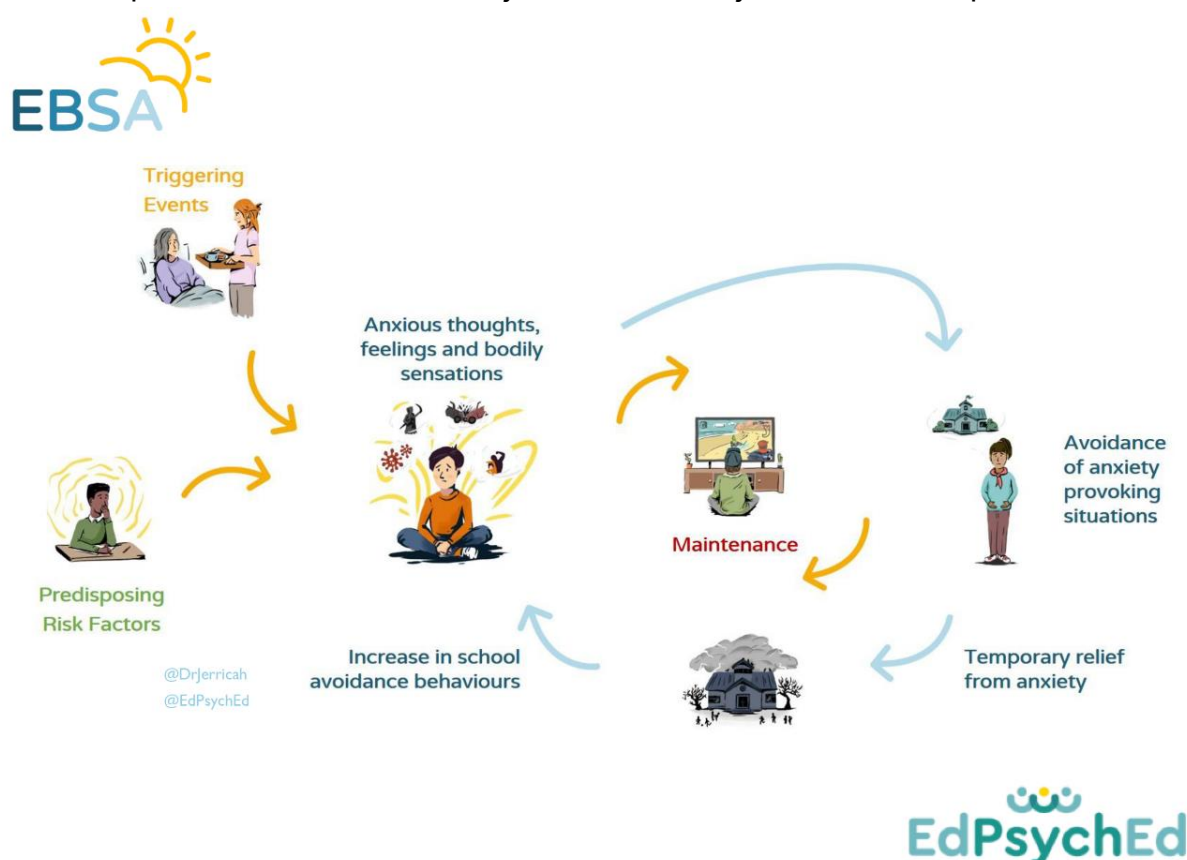


Figure 1: EBSA Anxiety maintenance cycles (developed by Ed Psych Ed)

EBSA can be a difficult challenge for both children and parents/carers. However, it is crucial to overcome this issue as soon as possible, as prolonged school absences can have several disadvantages for your child. Here are some reasons why it is important to address EBSA:

1. **Impact on learning progress:** when children miss school frequently, they miss out on lessons and may struggle to catch up on missed work. Regular attendance supports children to build on their learning and understanding daily. This improves their confidence and motivation and enables them to feel successful in their learning. When children miss school, they can become very aware of their learning gaps when they re-enter the classroom, and this is worrying for them.
2. **Social difficulties/ social isolation:** School is not just about academic learning. It's also a place where children can develop important social and emotional skills, such as communication, problem-solving, and empathy. Regular attendance can help them build positive relationships with their classmates and teachers and feel more connected to their school community. When children are not attending school, they may begin to feel lonely or miss out, and possibly begin to feel anxious about social situations. Children can then become worried about the social scenarios and situations they are missing out on, and how other children will respond to their absence.

In both examples above, avoiding school can lead to the child feeling more anxiety; they may develop new worries about the social and learning opportunities they have missed. These new worries can act as maintenance factors, which keep the anxiety going.

Other maintenance factors can impact on continuing the cycle of anxiety. For example, as suggested in Figure 1, escapism, such as playing video games or watching TV, can be a maintaining factor in children's anxiety. While it may provide temporary relief, it can also create a cycle of avoidance and lead to increased anxiety over time. Here's how:

- When a child is feeling anxious, it's natural to want to avoid the situation that is causing the anxiety. Escapism can provide a way to avoid these situations, but it doesn't address the root cause of the anxiety. Over time, avoidance can reinforce the anxiety, making it harder to confront and overcome.
- If a child relies too heavily on escapism as a coping mechanism, they may not develop healthy coping skills to deal with anxiety in the long term. This can make it harder to manage anxiety in other areas of their life and may lead to more severe anxiety difficulties.



### **Exploring the functions of your child's behaviour**

When a child avoids going to school, it can be a sign that they are struggling with something that is causing them anxiety or distress. This behaviour can serve several functions or purposes for the child, including:

1. To escape from something that is causing them discomfort or distress. For example, if your child has experienced negative social situations or conflict at school, they may avoid going to school to avoid the conflict and the associated feelings.
2. To gain attention or support from caregivers. If your child is struggling with emotional distress or a mental health difficulty, they may avoid going to school in order to receive attention, support, or assistance from you and other loved ones.
3. To avoid failure or negative outcomes. For example, if your child is struggling with academic work or feels like they cannot meet the expectations of their teachers, they may avoid going to school to avoid the possibility of failure or negative feedback.
4. To engage in positive experiences at home. For example, if your child is engaging in enjoyable activities (e.g., watching TV and playing games), they are more likely to want to spend time at home rather than at school.

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. As a parent/carer, it's important to offer support and understanding so that you and your child can work together to identify the root causes of their avoidance behaviour and subsequently support them to develop coping strategies to help them manage their emotions.

#### **'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).



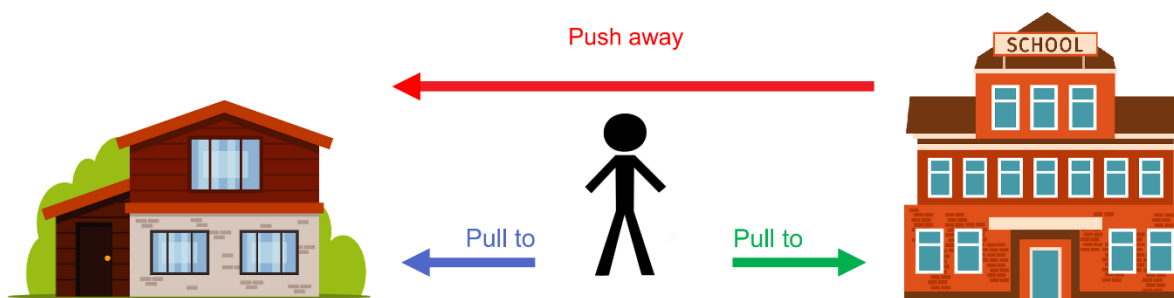


Figure 2: 'Push away' and 'Pull to' factors.

For children 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 your child from feeling like they can attend school. For instance, your child may experience higher levels of anxiety or stress getting ready in the morning or on the journey to school. Your child may also be struggling with academic challenges or feeling like they don't fit in with their peers. These negative experiences can cause your child 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 your child 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 engage in positive experiences at home. Overall, your child might 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 your child may be facing within the household, such as parental illness. These factors can cause your child to feel overwhelmed or anxious and may make them reluctant to attend school. 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.

EXAMPLES	In the School Environment	In the Home Environment
<b>Push Away Factors</b> – difficult and emotional experiences that might make your child feel they can't attend school.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The work is too hard.</li> <li>• Your child feels like they do not fit in.</li> <li>• The environment is too noisy/busy.</li> <li>• They are being bullied.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parental/sibling illness</li> <li>• Worrying that something might happen to a loved one at home.</li> <li>• Family bereavement</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They feel misunderstood.</li> </ul>	
<b>Pull To Factors</b> – positive experiences that draw your child towards either the home or school environment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feeling connected to their peers</li> <li>• Enjoying certain classes or activities.</li> <li>• Having a supportive teacher.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feeling safe at home.</li> <li>• Spending more time with caregivers and loved ones.</li> </ul>

As a parent or carer, it's important to be aware of both the 'push away' and 'pull to' factors that may be impacting your child's emotional experience with school. By addressing any negative experiences or emotions that may be pushing your child away from school, and promoting positive experiences that can pull them towards school, you can help your child feel more motivated, confident, and comfortable.

Remember, EBSA is a complex issue that requires a supportive and collaborative approach between you as parents/carers, and adults in school. Your child's school and (where appropriate) other professionals may want to meet with you to explore the push and pull factors impacting your child's behaviour. By working together with your child, their school, and any other professionals involved, you can help your child overcome their challenges and thrive. Therefore, it's important that you and school staff have clear and open communication which focuses both on your child's worries (and how to support them with these) and their school attendance (and what reasonable changes they can make over specified time frames).



### **Your child's life journey so far**

Sometimes your child's prior experiences impact how they respond to stress, fear, and anxiety. Risk and resilience factors are important concepts when it comes to understanding how children cope with emotional difficulties and the challenges they may experience.

### **Risk Factors ('Push away')**

Risk factors are experiences or situations that increase the likelihood of a child experiencing emotional difficulties or mental health challenges. For some children, specific events like the death of a loved one, a specific trauma (such as a car accident) or an illness (or fear of getting an illness) may increase their risk of experiencing anxiety associated with school attendance. Other children may have additional worries, such as around health and wellbeing of their family or worries around money

or security in the family. Additionally, children may have special educational needs which may further impact on their ability to manage anxiety, overcome their worries, or discuss their fears.

For some children and families, the experience of lockdown during the covid 19 pandemic has had an impact on their emotional well-being. It is taking some children longer to transition back into school following periods of home schooling. This could potentially be a risk factor that you may want to discuss with your child's school in further detail.

### **Resilience factors ('Pull to')**

Resilience factors, on the other hand, are experiences or characteristics that can help protect children from the negative effects of risk factors and promote their emotional well-being. These can include things like a positive and supportive family environment, strong social connections with peers and adults, effective coping skills, and access to support. Children can often overcome some of the hurdles in their lives by developing a 'positive growth mindset'. In its simplest form, this means believing that your abilities and performance can be developed and improved through hard work, persistence, and dedication. For your child, at first, they may need higher levels of adult support, reassurance, and guidance. As parents, you will then need to judge when you can reduce the amount of support you give by identifying changes in their confidence and their ability to cope with the challenges ahead of them.

It's important to remember that every child is unique, and the impact of risk and resilience factors may vary depending on your child's individual experiences and circumstances. However, identifying and addressing risk and resilience factors may help you to understand your child's emotional development and promote their overall well-being.

Professionals such as school staff, specialist teachers, family workers, and educational psychologists may work collaboratively with you to explore your child's risk or resilience factors. Communicating about risk and resilience factors with these trusted and supportive professionals can help ensure that the right support is put in place for your child and family.





## **How can you support your child?**

EBSA can be a challenging issue for children and their parents. As a parent, it's essential to understand that your child's fear and anxiety are real and that they need your support. Here are some tips on how to support your child at home with EBSA:

### **1. Listen and validate your child's feelings.**

The first step is to listen to your child's fears and anxieties about going to school. Validate their feelings by acknowledging that they are real and understandable. Let them know that you understand how they feel and that it's okay to feel that way. When your child feels heard and understood, they will be more likely to open up to you and seek your support. You could also talk to your child about what triggers their fear and anxiety about going to school. Is it the fear of separation from you, fear of social difficulties, or fear of failure? Understanding the root cause of the anxiety can help you find the best ways to support your child.

You can also validate your child's feelings by talking to them about your own responses to emotions. Model healthy coping strategies for your child. If you are feeling anxious, talk to your child about how you cope with stress and anxiety. Show them healthy ways to manage stress, such as exercise, meditation, or talking to a trusted friend or family member.

When listening and discussing your child's concerns it's important that they are given time to talk about their worries where necessary over time and in short bursts. Consider timetabling in time or creating a calm space where you both can give one another time and space to understand their worries. Often, adults begin focussing on the need to return to school as a priority. Whilst this is, of course important, it can be hard for children to discuss their emotions and therefore adding the pressure of school at early stages can make them feel unheard.

### **2. Begin to reflect on your child's EBSA related difficulties and feelings.**

It is important to work out what may be contributing to their anxieties at school ('push away' factors) and what might be helping them to avoid challenging some of their anxiety. This could involve considering your child's 'push away' and 'pull to' factors, i.e., their risk and resilience factors. As a parent/carer, your child may feel more able to communicate these issues with you. Therefore, your role in supporting them is working with them to communicate effectively with people in school. It is important to recognise that your child may feel most secure at home and therefore they may be more likely to talk about their concerns more freely at home.

It can be helpful to identify when they are able to manage their anxiety at home. Helping your child to identify strategies that they use at home to manage their anxiety may help them to see that they could find ways of coping in different situations.

### **3. Work collaboratively with your child, school staff and other professionals**

Working together with others to ensure that your child's needs are at the centre of any plans is key to progress. This can help your child feel more comfortable and safer at school. Encourage your child to build a positive association with school. This may include participating in extracurricular activities and making friends with classmates. Also, try to build a positive relationship with your child's teacher and discuss strategies to help your child feel more comfortable in the classroom. Communicate with school staff about what you feel will make school more positive for your child.

Your school should be familiar with the 'ordinarily available provision' toolkit. And there is a whole section within this that includes our EBSA toolkit. These toolkits can be used to think about some reasonable adjustments that the school will need to put in place to help your child transition back into school. Any transition plans should be considered together and adhered to. There should be a focus on the support available to your child, the areas that they may have most difficulties with and opportunities to discuss the positive steps that they have made (however small these may be at first).

#### **4. Build a support network and be kind to yourself.**

Encourage your child to build a support network of friends, family, and trusted adults in and out of school. A strong support network can provide a sense of security and comfort for your child. You need a support network too! It can be difficult to manage at home when your child is not attending school, particularly if you are working or not used to supporting your child with schoolwork. It is important that you support your child to complete the work provided for them from school. School staff should be working with you by providing learning opportunities at home, marking/providing feedback on your child's work, and meeting regularly to support your child to return to school. By continuing to complete work at home, your child is less likely to miss out on learning and more likely to have a more similar school learning routine at home.

It is also important that, where possible, you have other support networks to help remind you to be kind to yourself and to look after yourself. Know that you are doing the best you can and it's okay to take some time away from worries. Have time to do something you enjoy and recharge your batteries. If you feel you or your child need additional support with emotional wellbeing or mental health, consider joining a support group or seeking the help of a mental health professional.

#### **5. Try to keep to the school routine.**

Routines are important for adults and children as they provide a sense of security, predictability and can help establish healthy habits. Reflecting on the current routines in the family home and discussing these with professionals will be helpful. This will explore what the current routines look like and any changes that can be implemented. Key routines to consider will include the bedtime routine, Sunday evening plans, the morning routine on school days, and after-school arrangements. If your child is currently not attending school, it is important to set aside clear time for learning within the usual school hours. This will keep the link with learning, making it easier for them when they return to school. It is equally important to limit access to gaming and watching TV during school hours, although this could be used for short bursts in

certain circumstances where this helps to regulate your child and when they can watch educational material to support with their schooling at home.

### **EBSA and the Law**

Key documents:

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

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

Key points raised:

- This guidance applies to **any** pupils displaying any social, emotional or mental health issue that is affecting their attendance. It is **not only** for pupils who have a diagnosis, or a disability or special educational need.
- Any actions taken to support attendance are referred to as “**reasonable adjustments**”.
- **School staff must record absences as authorised where it is not possible for a pupil to attend due to illness (both physical and mental health related).**
- Any associated anxiety about attending [school] should be mitigated as much as possible by creating a plan to implement reasonable adjustments to alleviate specific barriers to attendance. These adjustments should be agreed by and **regularly reviewed** with all parties, including parents/carers.
- In developing a plan to support attendance through reasonable adjustments, school staff will need to take into account the **individual circumstances of the child**, being mindful of safeguarding responsibilities as set out in the Keeping children safe in education 2022 guidance.
- As part of any plan to support the child to attend well, schools should facilitate relevant pastoral support, including any support that can be offered by the pupil's most trusted adults in school.
- There is **no need to routinely ask for medical evidence to support recording an absence as authorised for mental health reasons**. In instances of long-term or repeated absences for the same reason, however, seeking medical evidence **may** be appropriate to assist in assessing whether the child requires additional support to help them to attend more regularly, and whether the illness is likely to prevent the child from attending for extended periods.
- In very exceptional circumstances, where it is in a pupil's best interests, a plan to help a child to attend well may involve the use of a temporary part-time timetable to meet their individual needs. For example, where a medical condition (including a mental health condition) prevents a pupil from attending school full-time and a part-time timetable is considered as part of a re-integration package.
- Any part-time timetable arrangements should be designed with the specific barrier to attendance in mind, have a **time limit** by which point the pupil is expected to attend fulltime, (either at school or at an alternative provision setting), and have **formal arrangements in place for regularly reviewing** the timetable with the pupil and their parents/carers.

- **A part-time timetable may also refer to full attendance at school, but with different arrangements for the attendance of lessons.** This is also a valid option and example of a reasonable adjustment (see the effective practice examples for more detail). We would encourage school staff to consider the same principles outlined in this section for this type of arrangement (i.e. for it to be regularly reviewed, agreed by all parties, building back up to full time spent in classes, etc.).
- Schools should inform the LA where pupils are likely to miss **more than 15 days**, and work with the family to provide educational provision whilst determining with the LA whether alternative provision should be provided under section 19 of the Education Act 1996.
- **LAs must not follow an inflexible policy of requiring medical evidence** before making their decision about alternative education. LAs must look at the evidence for each individual case, even when there is no medical evidence, and make their own decision about alternative education.
- **Taking forward attendance prosecution should only be considered where all other options have been exhausted or deemed inappropriate.** Where in-school pastoral and/or external specialist support is facilitated but not engaged with voluntarily, schools should work with LAs to consider whether to formalise support or to enforce attendance through legal intervention in the normal way under their existing powers. This includes instances where a mental health issue is affecting attendance.

### **Further support services and contacts**

- **Pinpoint** – Run by parents for parents to help Cambridgeshire’s parents and carers who have children with SEND and additional needs. Website: [pinpoint-cambs.org.uk](http://pinpoint-cambs.org.uk)
- **SENDIASS** - offers impartial and confidential information, advice and support to parents and carers who have a child with special educational needs, or a disability, or have concerns that their child has special educational needs. Website: [SENDIASS](http://SENDIASS.org.uk)
- **SEND Service 0-25** – is a local authority multi-disciplinary service that provides targeted support and aims to help meet the needs of children within the local community. Website: [SEND Service 0-25 - Cambridgeshire County Council](http://SENDService0-25.org.uk)
- **Cambridgeshire and Peterborough NHS Foundation Trust- (CPFT)**- This service offers adult mental health support. Their aim is to make psychological therapies more accessible to people experiencing common mental health problems such as depression and anxiety. The psychological therapies offered are approved by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. Adults can self-refer [NHS Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Talking Therapies | CPFT NHS Trust](http://NHS.uk)
- **YOUnited** – offers a range of support including therapies, counselling, and guided self-help. Referrals can only be made by a GP or any professional working with children. Website: [YOUnited | CPFT NHS Trust](http://YOUnited.org.uk)
- **Young minds** - A charity championing the wellbeing and mental health of young people. They publish a range of information for parents. They also have a parent helpline. Calls are free Mon-Fri from 9:30am to 4pm 0808 802 5544 Website: [Young Minds](http://YoungMinds.org.uk)

- **How Are You (H.A.Y.) Cambridgeshire and Peterborough** – This is a website that details various activities, courses and groups across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough to boost your wellbeing. Website: [How Are You Cambridgeshire and Peterborough | H.A.Y. Home \(haycambspboro.co.uk\)](https://haycambspboro.co.uk)
- **Kooth / Qwell - Kooth** is an anonymous website which helps children and young people to feel safe and confident in exploring their concerns and while seeking professional support. For additional contacts and services, please refer to the Kooth website. Children and young people aged between 11 and 25. Website: [Kooth for Children & Young People](https://www.kooth.co.uk). There is also a platform for anyone over the age of 18+, which offers similar professional support for mental health and emotional wellbeing. Website: [Qwell](https://www.qwell.co.uk)

