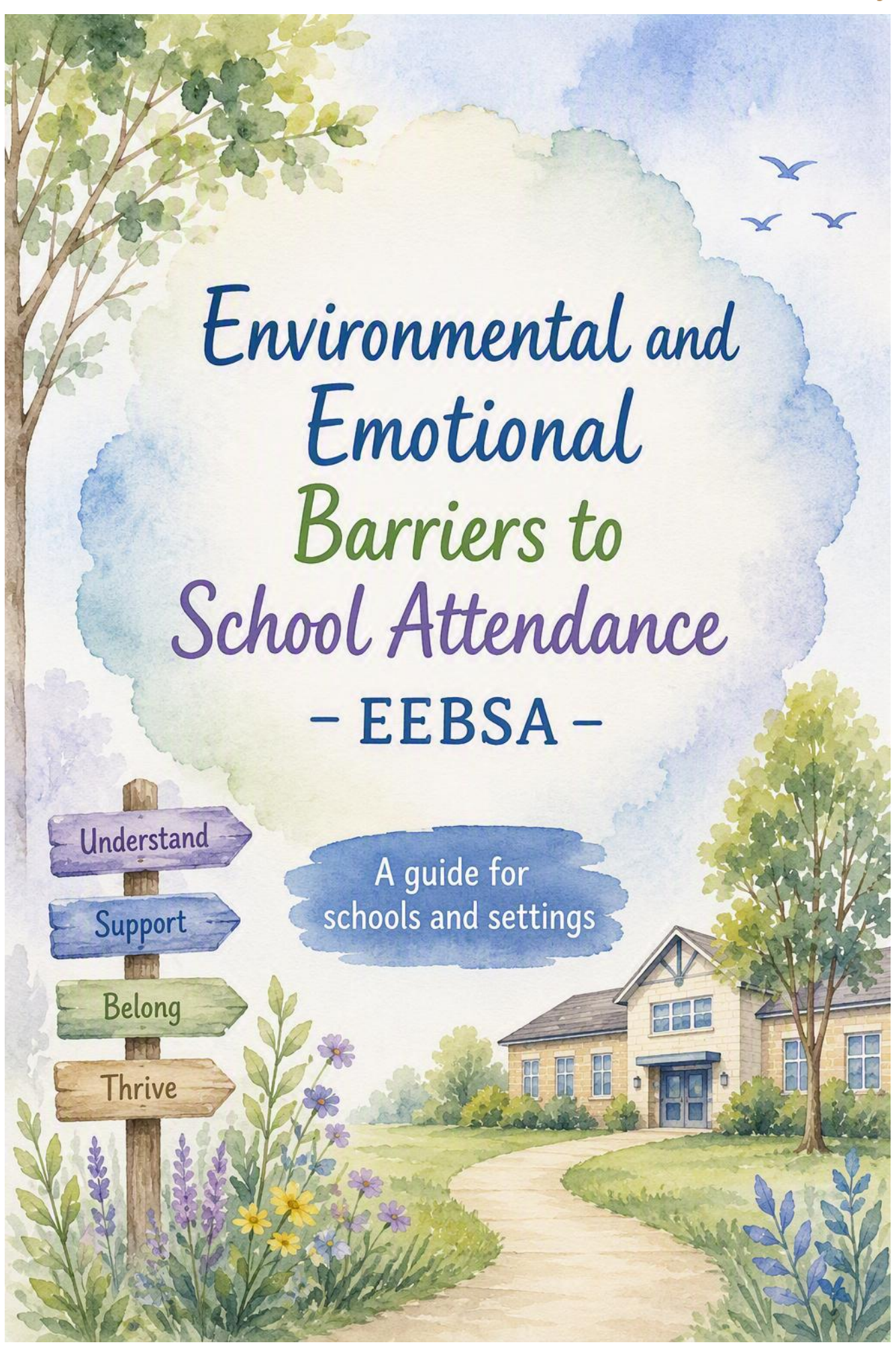




Environmental and Emotional Barriers to School Attendance – EEBSA –

Understand

Support

Belong

Thrive

A guide for
schools and settings

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This resource has been developed through a collaborative multi-agency partnership across education, health, local authority and voluntary sector services within Cambridgeshire. It reflects a shared commitment to improving understanding of Environmental and Emotional Barriers to School Attendance (EEBSA) and promoting consistent, evidence-informed and compassionate responses for children, young people and their families.



What do we mean by Environmental and Emotional Barriers to School Attendance (EEBSA)?



EEBSA is therefore best understood as:

- **A descriptive framework**, not a diagnosis. It helps adults understand that a child or young person's difficulty with attendance and/or engagement may be linked to barriers across home, school, relationships, learning, sensory experience, emotional wellbeing, health, trauma, poverty, transition, unmet additional needs or wider systemic factors.
- **A prompt for curiosity and formulation.** The key question is not "Does this child or young person have EEBSA?" but "What is making attendance or engagement difficult, what is maintaining the pattern, and what would help?"
- **A call for early, relational, graduated support.** Effective practice includes early identification, listening to the child and family, careful information gathering, environmental adjustments, trusted adult relationships and regular review.
- **A whole-system concern.** Attendance data alone does not tell the whole story: a child or young person may be physically present but not meaningfully engaged, or physically absent but still connected to learning and relationships.

EEBSA should not be thought of as:

- **A medical diagnosis or fixed category.** EEBSA is not something a child or young person "has", but instead reflects their experience with attendance and/or engagement that needs careful understanding.
- **The same as anxiety.** Anxiety may be present, but it should not automatically be assumed to be the primary cause. Attendance and engagement difficulties can reflect many interacting factors, including school environment, relationships, unmet needs, family stressors, sensory demands, transitions and social context.
- **Evidence of defiance, poor parenting or lack of school effort.** A no-blame, dignity-preserving approach is central. The focus should be on understanding barriers and building support, rather than attributing fault
- **A reason to wait for specialist involvement before acting.** Universal and school-based responses are essential and should begin early, using a graduated approach.
- **A shortcut to a particular intervention, provider or pathway.** Support should be matched to the child's formulation, not to a label.



EEBSA Myths and Helpful Reframing

Changing our mindset helps us understand, respond and support more effectively.

Myth

Helpful reframing



"The child has EEBSA."



EEBSA is not something a child "has"; it describes a pattern of attendance or engagement difficulty that needs careful understanding.



"EEBSA means anxiety."



Anxiety can be one factor, but EEBSA should be understood through a biopsychosocial and environmental lens.



"We need a diagnosis before we can support."



Schools can and should act on identified needs and barriers. Support does not need to wait for a diagnosis.



"This is mainly a family problem."



EEBSA usually reflects interaction between child, family, school and wider contextual factors. A no-blame partnership approach is essential.



"Attendance data tells us who is experiencing EEBSA."



Attendance data is important, but it is too crude on its own; schools also need to consider engagement, wellbeing, pupil voice and contextual risk factors.



"Specialist services will fix it."



Specialist input may help, but sustainable support is usually built through universal, whole-school, family-partnership and locality-based responses.

Curiosity, compassion and collaboration help create conditions where children and young people can thrive.

How attendance and engagement difficulties can develop

Most children and young people will experience worries about friendships, learning, transitions, changes, exams, social situations, family circumstances or the future at different points in their development as a normal part of life. These responses are part of being human and often reflect the challenges, demands and changes that children and young people encounter as they grow.

When discussing EEBSA, references to a child or young person being "anxious" should therefore not automatically be taken to mean that they have a clinically diagnosed anxiety disorder. In many cases, the term is being used more broadly to describe feelings of worry, stress, apprehension, unease or overwhelm that arise in response to real-life experiences and circumstances. These feelings may be temporary, situational and understandable given the child's context.

For some children and young people, a combination of factors may make aspects of education feel difficult, challenging or overwhelming. This can lead to increased worries, stress or physical discomfort, making attendance or engagement feel harder. In response, they may begin to avoid particular lessons, activities, places or situations, or find it difficult to fully participate in learning.

Avoidance or withdrawal can bring short-term relief by reducing the immediate discomfort. However, over time this may lead to fewer opportunities for learning, success, social connection and positive experiences. As confidence, belonging and familiarity reduce, returning to or engaging with education can feel even harder, reinforcing the cycle.

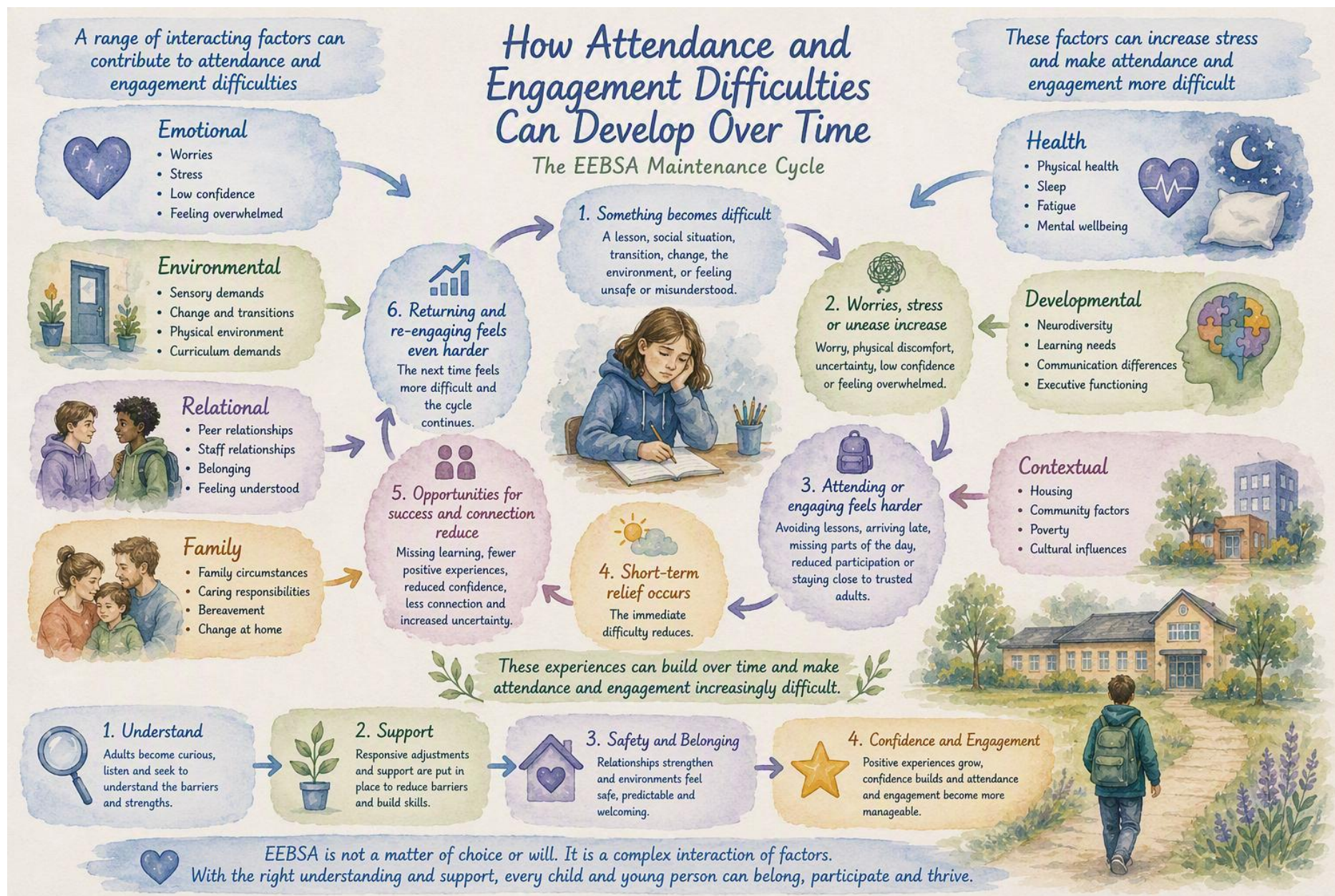
The key message is that this cycle is understandable rather than intentional. It is not about choice, defiance or lack of motivation and instead reflects the interaction between a child or young person and the systems, environments, relationships and experiences around them.

The cycle can be interrupted through early understanding, supportive relationships and appropriate adjustments. By working collaboratively to understand barriers, build on strengths and create conditions for safety, belonging and success, schools, families and services can help children and young people re-engage with education and thrive.

Understanding Push and Pull Factors

- **Push Factors** - Factors that make education feel more difficult, unsafe, overwhelming or less accessible
- **Pull Factors** - Factors that make alternative environments or behaviours feel safer, easier or more manageable in the short term

Push and pull factors should not be viewed as opposites, nor should they be seen as evidence that a child or young person is simply choosing not to attend. Instead, they provide a helpful framework for understanding the interaction between a child or young person and their wider environment. The same factor may act as a push factor for one child and not another, and many children and young people experience multiple interacting push and pull factors at the same time. It is also important to recognise that the same factor can act as both a push and a pull depending on the individual child and context.



Understanding Push and Pull Factors

Looking beneath attendance and engagement difficulties to understand what may be making education harder and what may be helping a child or young person feel safe.

PUSH FACTORS

Things that can make education feel more difficult, overwhelming or less accessible.



Relational

- Friendship difficulties
- Feeling excluded
- Not feeling understood



Environmental

- Noise and sensory demands
- Busy or unpredictable environments
- Challenging transitions



Learning

- Academic pressures
- Feeling left behind
- Unidentified or unmet need



Emotional and Wellbeing

- Worries
- Low confidence
- Feeling overwhelmed



Health and Life Circumstances

- Sleep difficulties
- Physical health needs
- Family stressors or life events

Something about education feels difficult right now.



Understanding attendance difficulties requires curiosity about both push and pull factors.

What might be making education difficult, and what is helping the child or young person feel safe?

PULL FACTORS

Things that may feel safer, easier or more manageable in the short term.



Safety and Comfort

- Familiar environment
- Reduced pressure
- Time to rest



Relationships

- Being close to trusted adults
- Reassurance
- Feeling understood



Regulation

- Reduced sensory demands
- Time to recover
- Predictability



Success and Competence

- Activities that feel manageable
- Special interests
- Positive experiences



Home Environment

- Comfort
- Security
- Sense of belonging

Children and young people experiencing EEBSA are often being pushed away from experiences that feel difficult whilst being pulled towards people, places and activities that feel safer or more manageable. Understanding both helps us identify meaningful support and reduce barriers to attendance and engagement.

How to support

Key Principles for Practice

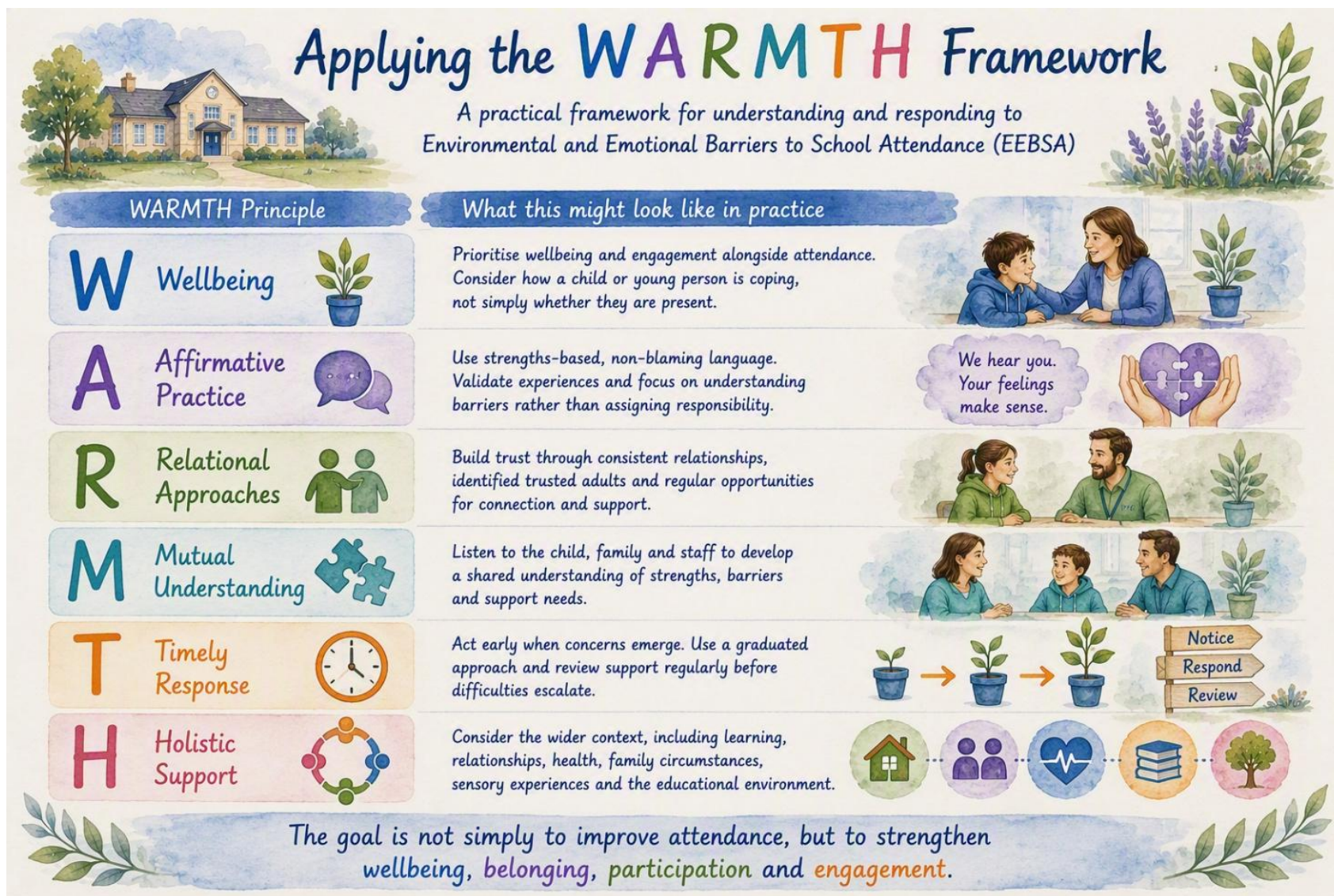
The WARMTH framework offers a values-based and practical lens to guide decision-making, conversations and support planning:

- **Wellbeing:** Prioritise emotional wellbeing, psychological safety and meaningful engagement, not attendance figures alone.
- **Affirmative Practice:** Use a strengths-based, dignity-preserving and no-blame approach that validates the experiences of children, young people, families and staff.
- **Relational Approaches:** Build trust through consistent, safe and supportive relationships, recognising that connection is central to engagement.
- **Mutual Understanding:** Develop a shared understanding of the child's experiences by listening to the child, family and professionals, and considering the interaction of emotional, developmental, relational, environmental, health and contextual factors.
- **Timely Response:** Act early when concerns emerge, using a graduated approach and reviewing support regularly to prevent difficulties escalating.
- **Holistic Support:** Consider the whole child within the context of their home, educational setting, relationships, strengths, needs and wider life experiences.

Building Capacity and Staying Curious

EEBSA should not be viewed as solely an individual concern or the responsibility of a single member of staff. Creating environments where children and young people feel safe, understood, included and able to participate requires a whole-school approach. Shared language, staff confidence, relational practice, emotional literacy, inclusive policies and a commitment to understanding barriers to attendance and engagement are all important components of effective support. Building capacity across the whole setting helps ensure that responses are consistent, proactive and embedded within everyday practice rather than relying on individual interventions alone.

It is also important to remember that EEBSA is a descriptive framework, not a diagnosis, category of pupil or predetermined pathway. The term should not replace professional curiosity or be used as a shorthand explanation for attendance difficulties. Instead, schools should remain formulation-led, continually seeking to understand the unique experiences of each child or young person. Effective practice involves returning to key questions such as: What is happening? What factors may be contributing? What strengths can we build upon? What support is helping? How do we know? By maintaining this curious, individualised and context-sensitive approach, support is more likely to remain responsive, meaningful and effective.



Adapted from the WARMTH Framework (Spectrum Gaming, Educational Psychologists and Young People with Lived Experience, 2024), which emphasises wellbeing, relationships, belonging, co-production and holistic understanding when responding to attendance difficulties.

Individual Support and Whole-Setting Development

Effective EEBSA support operates at two levels simultaneously. Individual children and young people may require tailored assessment, planning and support, whilst schools and settings continue to build whole-setting capacity, confidence and competence through reflection, training and inclusive practice development. Strengthening both individual support and the wider environment increases the likelihood of sustainable improvements in attendance, engagement, wellbeing and belonging.

Concerns Emerge

Attendance and engagement difficulties can present differently at different ages and stages of development. The examples provided later on in this document are not exhaustive and should not be used as a checklist. Instead, they may prompt curiosity about what a child or young person is experiencing and whether there are barriers to attendance or engagement that require further understanding and support. Attendance data alone does not tell the whole story. Some of the earliest indicators of EEBSA are changes in engagement, participation, wellbeing, confidence or belonging. A useful question for adults to consider is:

“Has something changed in this child or young person’s attendance, engagement, participation, wellbeing or connection with their educational setting?”

Exploring other areas of need

Attendance and engagement difficulties rarely arise from a single cause. When concerns emerge, it can be helpful to consider whether there are additional needs, barriers or contextual factors that may be affecting a child or young person's experience of education. Exploring areas such as literacy, communication, emotional literacy, mental health, sensory differences, learning needs, physical health, relationships and/or wider family circumstances can help build a fuller understanding of the child or young person's strengths, needs and experiences. This process is not about searching for a diagnosis, but about developing a holistic understanding of what may be helping or hindering participation, belonging and engagement, so that support can be better matched to the child or young person's individual context and needs.

Gathering child or young person’s views and narrative

Understanding a child or young person's views is central to developing an effective understanding of attendance and engagement difficulties. There is no single "best" tool for gathering views. The most appropriate approach will depend on the child or young person's developmental stage, communication preferences, strengths and needs. Some children may prefer to talk, whilst others may find it easier to draw, complete visual activities, use scales, photographs, digital tools or structured conversation prompts. The aim is not simply to gather information, but to create opportunities for children and young people to feel listened to, understood and actively involved in planning support.

Some examples of specific resources include (but are not limited to):

[School Wellbeing Cards](#); [Heather Moran Resources](#); [My School Experience Cards](#)

Individual Support and Whole-Setting Development

Two complementary strands of support that strengthen attendance, engagement, wellbeing and belonging

CASE-BY-CASE SUPPORT

A step-by-step approach to understanding and supporting individual children and young people



Both strands
work together
and inform
each other
continually.

DEVELOPING WHOLE-SETTING CAPACITY

Building the knowledge, skills and systems across the setting to support all children and young people



Effective EEBSA support combines individualised support for children and young people with ongoing development of whole-setting capacity, confidence and competence.

What Might We Notice?

Recognising early signs of attendance and engagement difficulties across different ages and stages.
Look for changes in attendance, engagement, participation, wellbeing and belonging.

Early Years (Early years settings)



What might we notice?

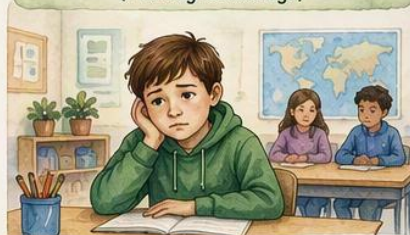
- Distress or upset at drop-off
- Difficulty separating from parents or carers
- Increased clinginess
- Frequent complaints of feeling unwell before attending
- Avoidance of particular activities or adults
- Changes in play, engagement or emotional regulation



Things we might be curious about...

- What has changed?
- Are they feeling safe and secure?
- Are their needs being met?
- Are they able to communicate how they feel?
- Do they have a trusted adult?

Primary (Primary school age)



What might we notice?

- Worries about school, friendships or specific lessons
- Frequent headaches, tummy aches or feeling unwell
- Reluctance to attend on particular days
- Avoiding specific places, people or situations
- Increased reassurance seeking
- Lateness or occasional absences



Things we might be curious about...

- How are friendships going?
- Is learning feeling manageable?
- Do they feel included and heard?
- Are transitions or changes difficult?
- Is something else happening at home?

Secondary (Secondary school age)



What might we notice?

- Increasing lateness or difficulty leaving home
- Avoiding particular lessons, subjects or situations
- Spending time in wellbeing spaces or outside lessons
- Requests to leave lessons or go home
- Withdrawal from friends or activities
- Concerns about workload, exams or social expectations
- Fatigue after the school day



Things we might be curious about...

- What feels hard about school?
- Are they feeling overwhelmed?
- Do they feel they belong?
- Are pressures or worries building up?
- Who are their trusted adults?

College / Further Education (16+ years)



What might we notice?

- Missing specific lessons or parts of the timetable
- Attending but not engaging with learning
- Avoiding social or communal spaces
- Difficulty managing independence and organisation
- Feeling overwhelmed by coursework or assessments
- Inconsistent attendance
- Withdrawal from peers or support



Things we might be curious about...

- Is the workload manageable?
- Are they coping with independence?
- Do they feel connected?
- Are there worries about the future?
- What support do they find helpful?

These are examples, not a checklist.

Early curiosity, understanding and supportive relationships can help prevent difficulties from increasing and support positive engagement and participation.



Gathering the Views of Children and Young People

Understanding a child or young person's views is central to developing effective support.
The most appropriate approach will depend on their developmental stage, communication preferences and strengths.



Early Years (Birth – 5 years)

- Play-based observation and conversations
- Drawing and storytelling activities
- Puppet play or small world play
- Emotion cards and visual feelings scales
- Photographs and visual choice-making activities

Primary Age (5 – 11 years)

- Draw-and-tell activities
- Feelings scales and emotion thermometers
- Three Houses, Three Islands or similar person-centred tools
- Circle mapping (people, places and activities that help or hinder)
- Sentence completion activities
- Worry or wellbeing questionnaires completed collaboratively

Secondary Age (11 – 16 years)

- Structured conversations and solution-focused approaches
- Scaling questions (e.g. "On a scale of 1-10...")
- Strengths and barriers mapping
- Emotion, belonging and engagement scales
- Digital surveys and reflective questionnaires
- Person-centred reviews and planning tools

College / Further Education (16+ years)

- Coaching-style conversations
- Self-reflection tools
- Participation and engagement mapping
- Strengths and aspirations discussions
- Digital questionnaires and surveys
- Solution-focused and future-focused planning tools

Useful Person-Centred Tools Across All Ages

- | | | | | | | | | | |
|-------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|--|---------------|----------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|--|--|
| | | | | | | | | | |
| One-Page Profiles | All About Me documents | The Three Houses Tool | Circle of Support / Relationship Mapping | Talking Mats® | Emotion Thermometers | My Day / Ideal Day activities | Strengths, Worries and Wishes | Scaling and solution-focused questions | Traffic light tools (what helps, what makes things harder, what needs attention) |

Remember

Think developmental age rather than chronological age. A secondary-aged pupil or college student may benefit from approaches typically associated with younger learners if these are more accessible and meaningful for them.



The goal is not simply to gather information, but to create opportunities for children and young people to feel listened to, understood and actively involved in planning support that works for them.

Gathering parent/carers views and narrative

Parents and carers are often the people who know the child or young person best. They may have valuable insights into their child's strengths, interests, experiences, worries, relationships, routines and any changes that have occurred over time. Understanding parent and carer perspectives can help schools develop a richer understanding of the factors influencing attendance and engagement, as well as identify existing strengths and sources of support.

Attendance difficulties can be stressful and emotionally demanding for families. Parents and carers may themselves feel worried, frustrated, blamed, exhausted or uncertain about how best to help. Creating opportunities for open, respectful and non-judgemental conversations can help build trust and support collaborative problem-solving.

Principles for Gathering Parent and Carer Views

- Approach conversations with curiosity rather than assumption.
- Use a strengths-based and no-blame approach.
- Recognise families as partners in understanding and supporting the child.
- Listen for strengths, successes and protective factors, not just difficulties.
- Explore what attendance and engagement looks like both at home and in education.
- Be mindful that parents and carers may have different perspectives and experiences.
- Consider cultural, community, family and contextual influences.
- Review and revisit views over time, as circumstances may change.

Helpful Questions to Explore

Understanding the Child or Young Person

- What are your child's strengths and interests?
- What do they enjoy doing?
- What helps them feel confident, safe and successful?
- What do they find more difficult or stressful?

Understanding Attendance and Engagement

- When did you first notice concerns emerging?
- Have there been any changes or significant events recently?
- Are there particular times, days, activities or situations that seem easier or harder?
- What does your child say about school, college or learning?
- What do mornings, transitions and the journey to school look like?

Understanding What Helps

- When attendance or engagement goes well, what seems to help?
- Are there particular strategies that your child responds positively to?
- Are there people, places or activities that help them feel calm, connected or confident?
- What support would you most like from the educational setting at this stage?

Examples of specific resources include (but are not limited to): [Risk Questionnaire](#) and [Resilience Questionnaire](#) and [Risk and Resiliency Scoring Spreadsheet](#).



Gathering the Views of Parents and Carers

Families are valuable partners in understanding and supporting a child or young person.

There are many ways to gather parent and carer views. The approach you choose will depend on your context, your relationship with the family and what will feel most accessible and helpful.



Examples of Approaches



1. Structured conversations

Arrange time to talk in a relaxed, respectful way. Use open questions and active listening.



2. Strengths and needs discussions

Explore what is going well, what may be more difficult and what support would help.



3. Early Help or Team Around the Family meetings

Bring the right people together to share information, understand the context and plan support.



4. Person-centred planning approaches

Work together to understand strengths, barriers, aspirations and plans for support.



5. Parent/carers questionnaires

Use surveys to gather views on experiences, needs and what might help.



6. Parent/carers narrative forms

Provide space for families to share their story in their own words.



7. Solution-focused conversations

Focus on what is working, what has helped before and what small steps could help move things forward.



8. Review meetings and check-ins

Regular opportunities to reflect on what is working, what needs to change and what support is needed.



9. Family mapping or timeline activities

Visual tools to explore important people, events and changes over time.



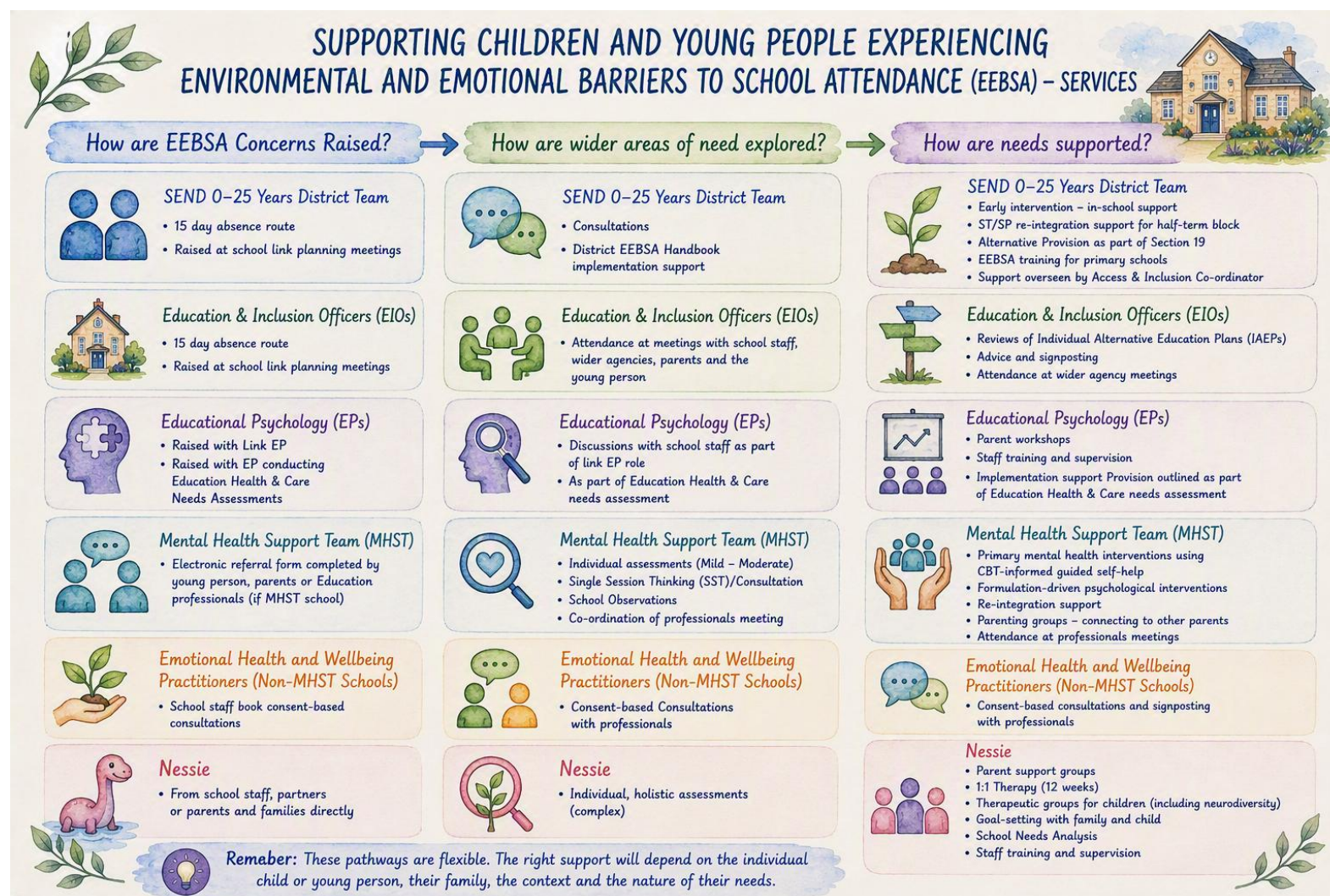
Remember: The aim is not simply to gather information, but to develop a shared understanding.

Parent and carer views help us understand what is happening, what is helping, and how we can work together to support the child or young person to feel safe, included and able to engage.



Support from other services

The following is not an exhaustive list of services and professionals who can provide support and does not replace school-based graduated response. It is intended to help schools understand potential routes for advice, consultation, signposting and support. Please note this may also be subject to change as services restructure in line with future government proposals.



Graduated Return and Re-Engagement Plan

The [Graduated Return and Re-engagement Plan](#) is designed to support case-by-case planning for individual children and young people, helping families, schools and professionals develop meaningful, manageable and regularly reviewed opportunities for participation and engagement.

Whole-School Reflection and Development Tool

Alongside individualised support through the Graduated Return and Re-engagement Plan, schools and settings are encouraged to use the [Whole-School Reflection and Development Tool](#) to reflect on the wider culture, relationships, systems and environments that support attendance, engagement, participation and belonging. Together, these resources promote both individual and whole-school approaches to understanding and responding to EEBSA.

Whole-School Training and Professional Development

Principles for evaluating training and support offers

There are a range of teams within Cambridgeshire County Council who offer free training around EEBSA and related content. Some examples include, but are not limited to the Educational Psychology Service, SEND District Teams and the PSHE service. This resource is not meant to promote one type training over another. Instead, schools are encouraged to consider any provider's approach against the following principles when considering external training, intervention or consultancy.

Questions for schools to ask before accessing training or intervention:

- Does this approach understand EEBSA as complex and multi-factorial?
- Does it avoid presenting EEBSA as a diagnosis or category of child?
- Does it include school environment, relationships and systems — not just child anxiety?
- Does it promote dignity, belonging and no-blame language?
- Does it include parent/carer partnership and pupil voice?
- Does it support early intervention and graduated review?
- Does it help staff build capacity, rather than creating dependency on external professionals?
- Does it include ways to evaluate whether support is making a positive difference?
- Could any part of the approach unintentionally increase shame, pressure or avoidance?
- Is the approach consistent with Cambridgeshire's agreed EEBSA language and principles?



What does statutory guidance say about EEBSA?

The Department for Education's statutory guidance, [Working together to improve school attendance: July 2026](#), makes clear that schools should adopt a support-first, partnership-based approach to attendance. The guidance emphasises that absence is often an indication of wider circumstances and that schools should work collaboratively with children, young people and families to understand and address barriers to attendance.

The statutory guidance expects schools to:

- Build strong relationships with families.
- Listen to and understand barriers to attendance.
- Work in partnership with families to remove those barriers.
- Be particularly mindful of pupils whose attendance may be affected by mental health needs, SEND or physical health difficulties.
- Put support in place early rather than waiting for difficulties to become established.

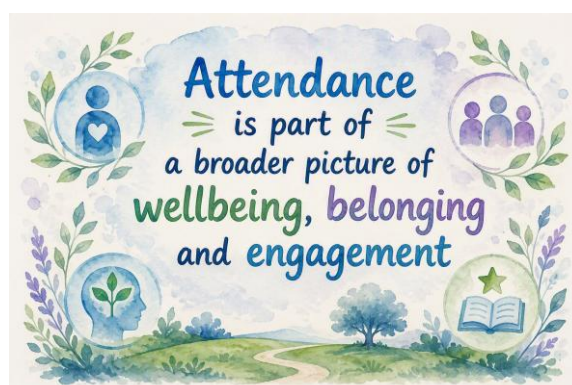
Where a child is unable to attend because of illness, schools should use Code I (Illness). This applies to both physical and mental health-related illness. The guidance is clear that schools are not expected to routinely request medical evidence to authorise illness-related absences.

Schools should only request reasonable medical evidence where:

- There is a genuine and reasonable doubt about the authenticity of the illness; or
- The school is seeking to understand prolonged, frequent or recurring absences in order to identify appropriate support and provision.

The guidance also states that schools should:

- Not be rigid about the form of evidence requested.
- Discuss with families what evidence is realistically available.
- Avoid placing unnecessary pressure on GPs and other health professionals.
- Consider alternative evidence where available.
- Recognise that a conversation with the parent (and pupil where appropriate) may itself provide sufficient evidence.





Medical Evidence, Illness and EEBSA

A supportive, curiosity-based approach

Our aim is to understand, reduce barriers and work in partnership with children, young people and families.



Ways to be supportive



Accept what families tell you

In most cases, a parent's notification that their child is too ill to attend school is sufficient. Absence should be recorded using Code I (Illness) for both physical and mental health related illness.



Take time to listen and understand

Explore what is happening, what might be helping and what barriers exist. Listen to the child or young person and their family with curiosity and compassion.



Consider the wider picture

Think beyond attendance data. Consider wellbeing, engagement, learning needs, relationships, family circumstances and contextual factors.



Request evidence only when needed

If there is genuine and reasonable doubt about the authenticity of an illness, or to understand prolonged, frequent or recurring absence, you may request evidence.



Discuss what evidence is realistic and helpful

Be flexible about the type of evidence. A conversation with a parent and the child or young person may be enough.



Act early and provide support

Explore needs and barriers early. Put in place reasonable adjustments and support that helps the child or young person feel safe, included and able to engage.



A relationship of trust and understanding helps us work together to support attendance, wellbeing and belonging.

Remember

EEBSA is not about choice or refusal. It reflects the complex interaction of factors that can make attendance and engagement difficult.

Things that are unhelpful



Don't routinely ask for medical evidence

Schools are not expected to routinely request GP letters or medical evidence to authorise illness-related absence, including for mental health.



Don't direct families to the GP unnecessarily

Repeatedly asking for medical appointments or letters can increase pressure on families and health services and create additional stress.



Don't question or challenge without understanding

Avoid assuming that a lack of medical evidence means the difficulty is not real or that absence is not genuine.



Don't delay support while waiting for a diagnosis

Support does not need to wait for a diagnosis or specialist report. Schools can act on identified needs and barriers.



Don't focus only on attendance numbers

Attendance data is important but too crude on its own. Look at engagement, wellbeing, pupil voice and risk factors.



Don't assume blame or apply shame

Avoid language that implies fault, poor parenting, manipulation, defiance or a lack of resilience.



Curiosity, compassion and collaboration help create the conditions in which children and young people can feel safe, connected and able to thrive.