



Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA)

Information for school staff

Introduction

Adults working in schools understand the importance of a positive and supportive learning environment. However, there are times when students experience challenges that lead to emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA), sometimes known as school refusal or persistent absenteeism. Rather than the term 'school refusal', the term EBSA recognises that this avoidance has its root in emotional, mental health or wellbeing issues. EBSA should not be thought of as a deliberate act of defiance, but instead as a complex issue inextricably linked with mental health and wellbeing. In this information leaflet we will explain how EBSA can present in school, some of the factors which may contribute to it and how you could support a young person who is experiencing EBSA.

What is EBSA?

Worrying or anxiety is a normal feeling that we all experience from time to time. It can keep us safe from harm or help us perform in difficult situations. Sometimes anxiety or excessive worrying can become a problem, especially when it stops people doing what they want or need to do. Many children and young people worry about school. This is normal. Anxieties are part of life and learning to deal with them is part of growing up.



However, sometimes these worries may lead to difficulties attending school. When a young person has lots of worried feelings and does not want to attend school, they may be experiencing emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA). We take a broad definition of EBSA. If a child has high levels of anxiety, difficulties attending certain classes, struggles with engaging with parts of the school day and/or does not want to attend school, they may be experiencing EBSA.

Some indicators that a young person may be experiencing EBSA include:

- A parent or carer reporting that the child or young person does not want to come to school
- Physical signs believed to be linked to stress (e.g. stomach ache, sickness, headache)
- The child or young person often complaining of feeling ill
- Behavioural changes or fluctuations e.g. interactions with others, reduced motivation and engagement in learning tasks
- Not going to their classroom
- Not staying in class
- Not attending some lessons
- Being late to lessons/school
- Avoiding some physical spaces or people

Not 'Fine in School'?

EBSA is not always obvious, particularly if a child is still managing to attend school some of the time. In fact, we often hear that children may appear to be 'fine in school'.



However, if you are aware that a young person is experiencing any of the difficulties above, it is important to be compassionate and avoid judgement. It is natural, in social situations for individuals to ‘mask’ worries, anxieties or other difficulties to try and ‘fit in’ with expectations. Sometimes this ‘masking’ can be exhausting for young people and increase their feelings of worry about school.

For some young people, this stress can come out as behaviours which appear challenging or confrontational. Be aware that these behaviours are likely signalling that they are feeling overwhelmed. By being attuned to subtle signs of worry and making adjustments, such as those described below, you can make a real difference to how a young person feels about school.

When we talked to local young people about their experiences of EBSA, they were clear that those adults in school who ‘believe’ them and ‘listen’ make a real difference to how they feel about school.

What causes EBSA?

There is no single reason why a young person experiences worries about school. It is usually a complex interplay of factors which could relate to the home, school or child.

We recommend that school work with the young person and family to understand what may be contributing to worries about school so that any support and adjustments can be tailored to an individual’s needs.



Some of the factors that impact on EBSA include:

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

Understanding anxiety and EBSA

When we experience anxiety, we can feel a strong need to avoid the situation that is causing us worry. When we do this, we feel relief.

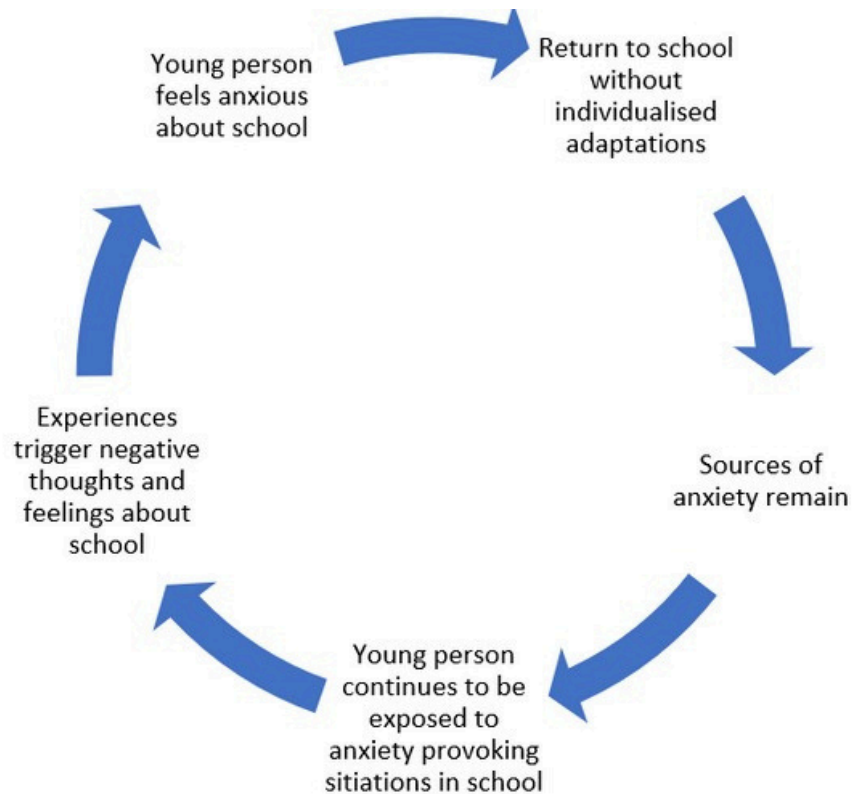
When young people experience EBSA and avoid school, this relief, alongside increased worries about missed school work, social isolation and feeling safe at home, can further increase feelings of worry about school and make attending even harder.

This is why we recommend that a young person is supported to return to school/maintain school attendance.



However, it is important to recognise that this return needs to be alongside support and adjustments in school.

Continuing to attend, without any changes will also increase and maintain anxiety, as shown in the diagram opposite.



What can you do?

- Be aware of the signs of EBSA and speak to a member of staff with responsibility for pastoral care/EBSA Lead in your school if you have concerns about a child you think may be experiencing this.
- Get to know your school's processes and support available for young people experiencing EBSA.
- Make sure you know the children who have a support plan due to EBSA and follow the agreements within this plan. Consistency and predictability are really important for young people who experience any form of anxiety, so knowing the plan and sticking to it will help.



- In particular, be aware of any agreements about leaving class early/ arriving late and do not draw attention to agreements that are part of a support plan.
- Try to talk to the young person and ask them how they prefer to be greeted/communicated with in class. For some young people, they may not want any attention to be drawn to them when they attend class, for others, it can be important to spend some time with them individually to foster a sense of connection and belonging.
- Consider seating arrangements which will support positive peer interactions and reduce any sensory needs from being in the classroom.
- Notice strengths and give feedback to the young person about their achievements and progress to help them recognise their successful moments in school.
- If a child has a time-out pass, do not question their use of this when they express they need it. If you have concerns about how they are using a time-out pass, speak to the key adult who is responsible for the support plan.
- Talk to the young person about any support they may need for missed work. Try to give reassuring messages about work that has been missed and how you can support them with this.
- Find out if the young person is experiencing any additional SEND needs and how you can support this in class.



- If you notice a child has not been in school for a number of days, talk to the key adult who is coordinating support to find out if you can send any work/useful resources or thoughtful message to the child. When a child is out of school, opportunities to maintain connections and a sense of purpose are really important for their mental health and can make a return to school easier.
- Be curious and try to give attuned messages of optimism and hope. We all need people who understand and care about us and who can give us hope that things will get better and that we are not alone. Remember to make these messages genuine, by acknowledging a young person's worry rather than dismissing it.

Things sound really tough for you at the moment. You are doing well to be here. I want to help you, so let me know if there are things I can do to help in class.

If you would like more information, please refer to Bradford's Guidance on Responding to EBSA in Schools.

The wording in this publication can be made available in other formats such as large print. Please call: 01274 439500