



Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA)

Guidance document for schools and professionals in Sutton

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
What is Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA)?	3
Risk and resilience factors of EBSA.....	5
Factors associated with vulnerability of EBSA.....	5
Balancing risk and protective factors	6
Anxiety and avoidance	7
Worries that can trigger a cycle of anxiety and EBSA.....	7
Autism and anxiety	8
Possible indicators of EBSA	9
Intervention and putting in place support.....	10
Overview of pathway.....	11
Pathway for EBSA	12
Guidance around action planning.....	15
Transition.....	16
Useful links and resources	17
Information gathering pro-forma	19
Assessment – capturing the views of the child or young person	20
Action Plan template.....	21
Strategies and support for an action plan	22
Intervention and strategies related to the four functions of EBSA.....	23
Talking Mats resource	24

Introduction

Emotionally Based School Avoidance can be a difficulty for pupils of all ages, in all forms of educational settings, and at any stage of a pupil's educational experience. Whilst some children and young people stop attending school overnight, for most, the pattern of non-attendance and avoidance gradually occurs over time. It is therefore important that schools and parents are aware of the risk factors, early indicators, and pathways of support for school avoidance.

This guidance¹ has been created in response to local need to provide clarity around the different roles of professionals involved, and to identify best practice. It has been a joined-up process between Sutton CAMHS, Sutton Tuition and Reintegration Service (STARS) and Cognus Educational Psychology Service. It is hoped that this guidance provides an overview that is useful for practitioners across education and health sectors, as well as parents.

What is Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA)?

EBSA is a term used to describe children and young people (CYP) who have severe difficulty in attending school due to emotional factors, often resulting in prolonged absences from school (Thambirajah, Grandison and De-Hayes 2008). This is not a homogenous group of CYP, and avoidance can be underpinned by a number of factors. EBSA is different to truancy which refers to non-attendance at school undertaken without parental/carer knowledge.

The term 'school refuser' is often used, although many are moving away from this language as the term 'refuser' and notion of 'refusing' implies that the CYP has full control over their non-attendance. The language of refusal also locates the 'problem' within the CYP and minimises other factors that will have led to the avoidance and be maintaining the situation. It also limits the understanding of factors that will need to be addressed to support a CYP back into school. In addition, 'within child' understandings of anxiety are also considered to be less helpful than those which take into account the wider environment of a CYP, and that more holistic models of understandings of school avoidance result in more effective intervention plans.

"School refusal occurs when stress exceeds support, when risks are greater than resilience and when 'pull' factors that promote school non-attendance overcome the 'push' factors that encourage attendance" (Thambirajah et al, 2008: p. 33).

This document provides further information about the risk and resilience factors portrayed in this definition by Thambirajah, as well as the 'push' and 'pull' factors. The factors surrounding a CYP who is not attending school will vary so widely it is important that individual understandings are sought quickly, and that intervention plans are personalised. It is hoped that the guidance within this document will support schools, families, young people and other professionals to take the most effective steps for supporting EBSA.

¹ Information in this pack has made use of resources created by West Sussex Educational Psychology Service.

Emotionally Based School Avoidance – Sutton pathway and guidance document

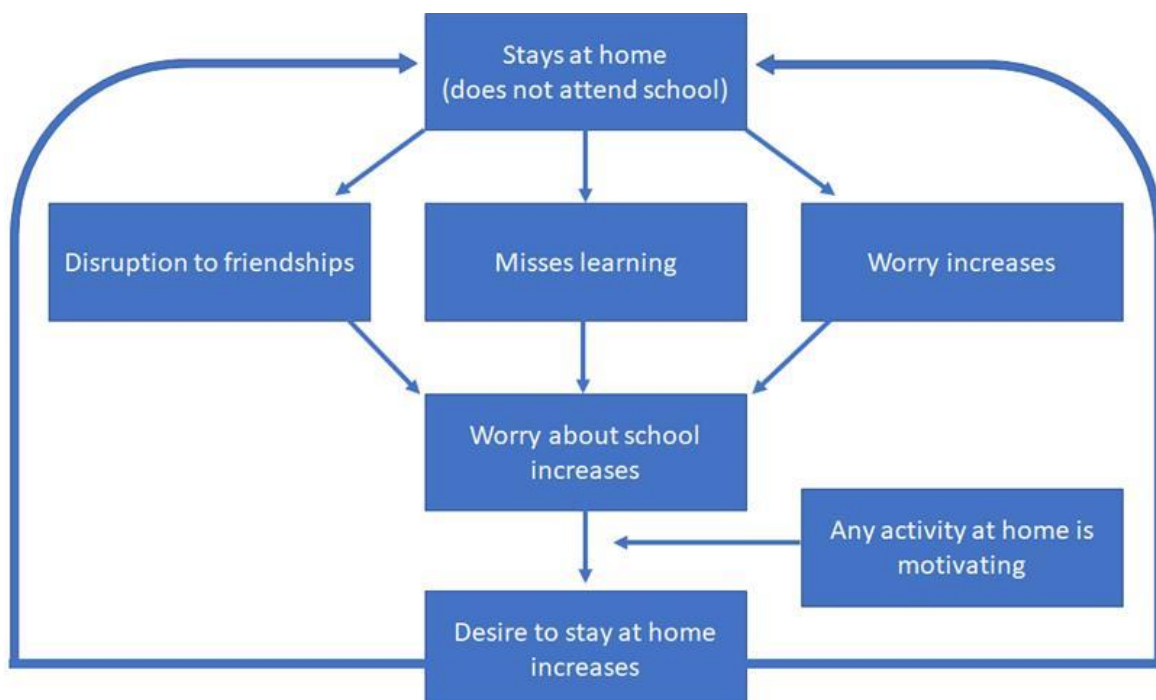
In a review of the literature surrounding school avoidance, Kearney and Silverman (1990) defined four main themes that cause school avoidance behaviours for CYP:

1. To avoid uncomfortable feelings brought on by attending school, such as feelings of anxiety or low mood.
2. To avoid situations that might be stressful, such as academic demands, social pressures and/or aspects of the school environment.
3. To reduce separation anxiety or to gain attention from significant others, such as parents or other family members.
4. To pursue tangible reinforces outside of school, such as going shopping or playing computer games during school time.



For some CYP more than one of the above factors may be at play, but for most there is a primary factor that provides the most explanation. In further work by the authors, they make the distinction between the first two factors in which a pupil's feelings are **negatively reinforcing** the avoidance, and the final two in which factors outside of school are **positively reinforcing** the avoidance (Kearney & Spear, 2012). Unpicking which of the four reasons most accurately explains the situation of a CYP is very helpful when planning the necessary intervention.

As the diagram below shows, the longer a pupil is out of education, the more their worry increases, and their desire to stay at home increases. Further information about the cycle of anxiety and avoidance is included later in this document.



Risk and resilience factors of EBSA

Whilst understandings of reasons underpinning EBSA (Kearney and Silberman’s four factor model) may be relatively straightforward, the wide variety of factors that can act either as risk or resilience measures is much more complex. Not only do some factors increase the likelihood that a CYP may avoid school, but some factors when experienced at the same time can exacerbate the risk, whilst others can counteract and balance one another out. Timing and trigger points are also important, because whilst a CYP may have sufficient protective factors to outweigh risk factors, a single event may disrupt the balance in favour of the risk factors very quickly.

The following table features a range of risk factors that are known to underpin school avoidance, although as noted above these will need to be carefully understood in the context of protective and resilience factors (*e.g. a pupil who has strong feelings of self-efficacy, who feels listened to and understood, a school who works to develop trusting relationships with parents, parents who are able to accept support to change how they respond to a pupil*). It is unlikely that a child could be found who has not experienced any of the below risk factors at some point in their lives, yet prolonged school avoidance is seen in relatively few CYP.

Factors associated with vulnerability of EBSA

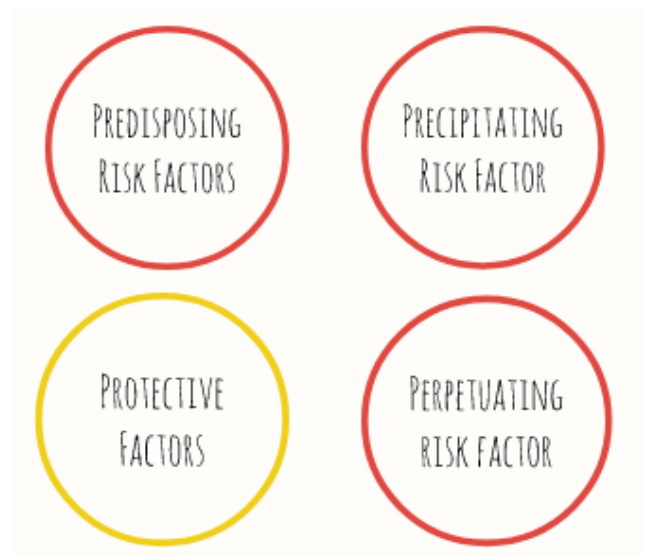
Factors within school	Factors related to the family context	Individual factors within a child
Bullying (most common school factor) Difficulties in specific subject Transition to secondary school, key stage or change of school Structure of the school day Academic demands/high levels of pressure and performance-orientated classrooms Transport or journey to school Exams Peer or staff relationship difficulties	Separation/divorce or change in family dynamic Parent physical and mental health problems Overprotective parenting style Dysfunctional family interactions Being the youngest child in the family Loss and bereavement High levels of family stress Family history of EBSA Young carer	Temperamental style- reluctance to interact and withdrawal from unfamiliar settings, people or objects Fear of failure and poor self confidence Physical illness Age (5-6, 11-12, 13-14 years) Learning difficulties, developmental problems or Autism if unidentified or unsupported Separation anxiety from parent Traumatic events

Balancing risk and protective factors

As is the case with most elements of emotional wellbeing, resilience is a consequence of the balance of risk and protective factors. If a young person is experiencing a lot of risk factors but at the same time a number of protective factors, this may result in them having the resilient resources to cope. Alternatively, another young person with relatively few risk factors may also have fewer protective factors and as a consequence be unable to cope and demonstrate resilience in the face of adversity.

As described above it is the complex interplay of factors that predispose a pupil to be more vulnerable to EBSA. The Four P's biopsychosocial model can be a helpful way of identifying the different factors present for a young person at any given time, and therefore be a way of evaluating how much of a risk for EBSA there is, as well as providing some guidance about how to best target intervention. The four P's are as follows:

- Predisposing factors = factors that increase the **inherent vulnerability** of a person to experiencing something e.g. a pupil who displays separation anxiety
- Precipitating factors = changes, events or situations that act as a **trigger** e.g. exams, parental separation
- Perpetuating factors = things that **maintain** a situation. Avoiding school (and the factors that they are worried about) and having enjoyable activities at home, makes staying away from school a positive experience
- Protective factors = things that promote **resilience** in relation to any of the three types of factors above



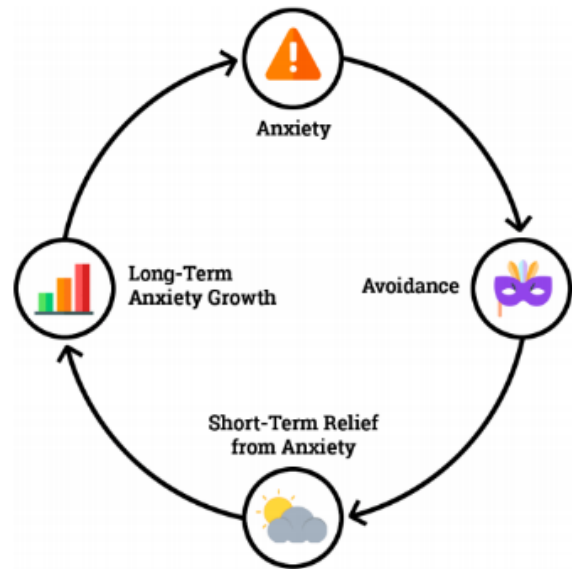
The factors that fit within each of the four P's will include those detailed in the vulnerability table above, as well as protective factors. It is important to emphasise that understanding the interplay of factors present for an individual is what makes the difference.

Questions to ask in relation to the four P's (see Appendix for further suggestions)

1. What are the understandings of the situation/problem (from the perspective of the CYP, parents, school staff)?
2. What factors may have contributed to the development of the problem?
3. Why now? What are current factors or stresses that have triggered the problem at the current time?
4. What factors might be contributing to the problem continuing?
5. What are the positives in this situation? What are the strengths we can draw upon?

Anxiety and avoidance

Models of anxiety are familiar with the concept of avoidance which explains how an initial worry can start a cycle of anxiety that quickly escalates. Whilst a certain level of anxiety is normal and helpful (we actually do better in some situations with a bit of anxiety), pervasive anxiety that inhibits us in any aspect of our lives is unhelpful for our wellbeing. The diagram below shows how a situation starts the cycle by making us feel uncomfortable, worried and anxious, and how by avoiding this situation whilst we then experience short-term relief, the feelings of anxiety next time we are in that situation are more intense. The cycle then continues as the more intense feelings of anxiety are harder to manage, and over time the anxiety increases.



Worries that can trigger a cycle of anxiety and EBSA

We know that young people can feel worried, anxious or unmotivated about school for lots of different reasons. For some there will be situations in school that are making them worry, whereas for others something outside of school may trigger them to feel more worried and motivate them to stay at home. A study by YoungMinds lists the following as the most common worries young people have about school:

- Finding the work difficult, or having problems concentrating
- Finding school exhausting, especially if they are dealing with mental health issues
- Feeling pressure to get good exam results
- Difficult relationships with friends and friendship groups
- Not feeling accepted or that they 'fit in'
- Not getting on with teachers
- Feeling pressured to be the same and learn like everyone else
- Experiencing or witnessing bullying
- Feeling unsupported and not seen as an individual
- Additional educational needs not being recognised
- Feeling average or no good in a class of high-achieving peers
- Feeling overwhelmed by the environment
- Difficulties or changes at home, such as relationships with parents or siblings

Autism and anxiety²

Although there is little research evidence available, anecdotally it is understood that children and young people with social communication difficulties, or a diagnosis of Autism, are more prone to experiencing difficulties with attending school and anxiety surrounding school attendance.

These increased risks seem to be explained by the behaviours and developmental differences inherent within Autism including those linked to:

- **Social communication difficulties** and struggles to make sense of the world around them e.g. not knowing what might happen next or the expectations of other people
- **Social interaction difficulties** and challenges in understanding others and how they may be feeling, as well as understanding their own emotional state
- Difficulties **processing sensory information** and heightened sensitivity to environmental stimuli meaning they feel overwhelmed
- **Cognitive differences** such as more rigid, inflexible thinking or difficulties with working memory e.g. struggling to hold information in mind, or to view the 'bigger picture'

Examples of triggers

These factors combined can mean that school becomes more challenging for pupils with Autism as they get older, because the curriculum becomes less flexible, and the social environment becomes more complicated and less adult-led. The onset of puberty can also be an additional challenge for all young people, but for those with Autism it can be experienced as a more profound and distressing situation. Additionally, whilst we know that transition and change can be a common precursor to school avoidance, for pupils with Autism a lack of routine and unexplained changes can feel stressful and lead to heightened anxiety, ultimately culminating in non-attendance at school.

- Anxiety relating to elements of the school environment e.g. toilets, corridor, canteen, changing rooms
- Escape from aversive social situations e.g. negative relationships with peers or teachers
- The uncertainty and unpredictability that is part of secondary school life
- The stress of peers not sticking to rules; others' poor behaviour
- Lack of consistency in teaching styles and behaviour expectations
- Staff with limited understanding of Autism whose handling of arising issues may inadvertently exacerbate situations
- Academic pressure and in particular, writing demands (e.g. extended writing tasks)
- Poor sleep (common in young people with Autism)
- Difficulties arising from poor executive functioning – the ability to plan, organise, initiate and complete tasks and have equipment (e.g. punishment for forgetting PE kit)

Parents may often spot the warning signs before school staff do, therefore responding early to 'dislike' and expressions of unhappiness about school is imperative.

² The information on this page has been adapted from materials created by Manchester City Council including the document 'ABSA and Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC)'

Possible indicators of EBSA³

As the reasons underpinning the anxious feelings a pupil has will differ, so will the ways in which these worries manifest. Here are some potential early warning signs to be aware of.

Difficulty attending school with periods of prolonged absence

CYP reluctant to leave home and stays away from school with the knowledge of parent/carer

Younger children – reluctance to leave parents to get out of the car/at the school gate

Regular absence without indication of anti-social behaviours

Frequent absences for minor illnesses

Patterns in absences e.g., particular days and/or subjects, after weekends and holidays

Reluctance to attend school trips

CYP expresses a desire to attend classes but is unable to do so

Anxiety on separation and inappropriate dependence on family members. E.g.: worry expressed about the safety of those at home

Evidence of under-achievement of learning potential

Social isolation and avoidance of classmates or peer group

Challenging behaviours, particularly in relation to specific situation at school

Severe emotional upset with excessive fearfulness, outbursts of temper and complaints of feeling ill on school days

Depression and sense of isolation resulting in, low self-esteem and lack of confidence

Confusion/extreme absent mindedness shown in school due to lack of concentration resulting in lower attainments

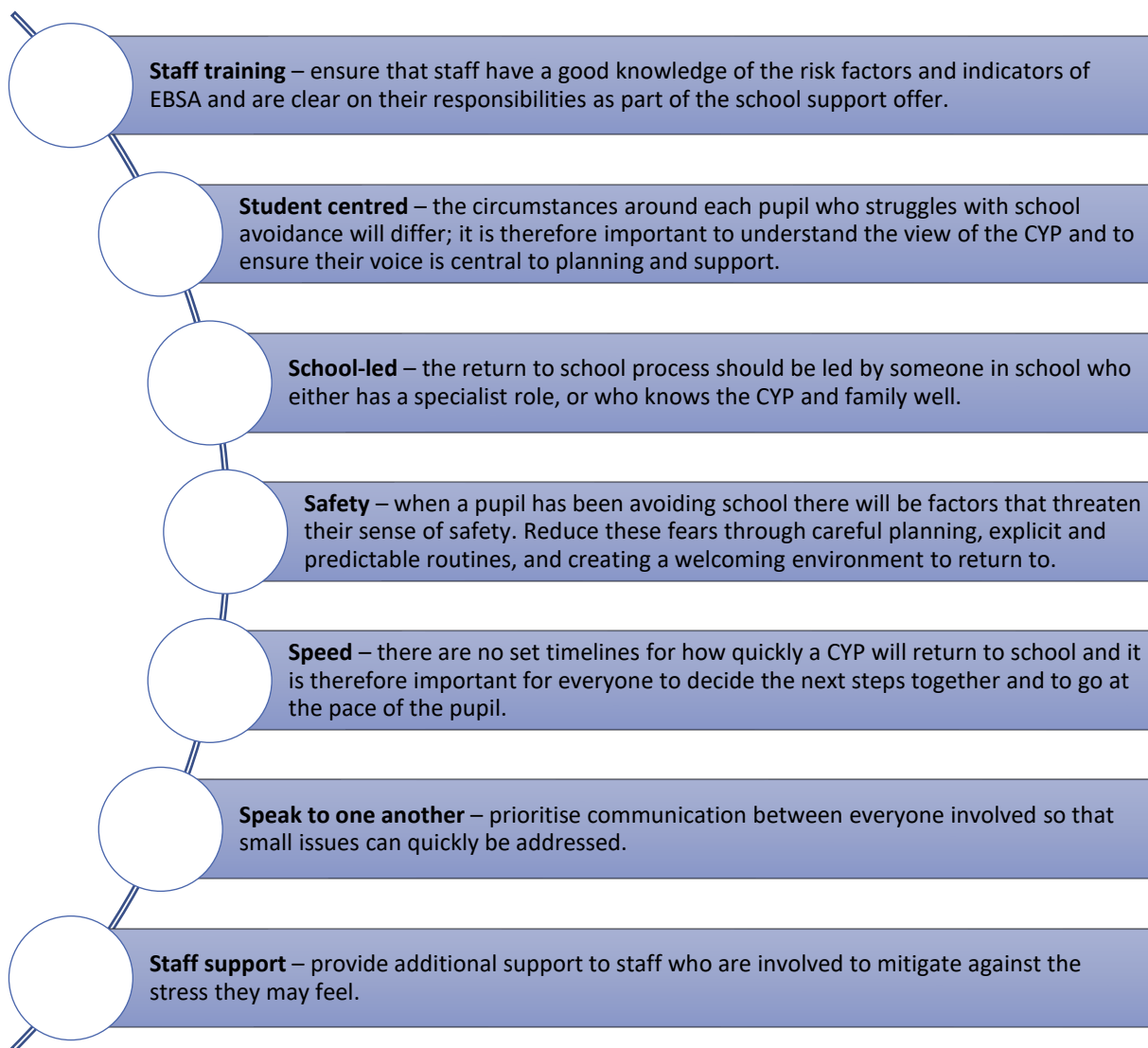
Physical changes: sweating, sickness, aching limbs headaches, panic attacks, abdominal pain, weight loss/gain

Intervention and putting in place support

Research indicates that the quicker the reasons for the school avoidance can be identified, and a support plan put in place that takes into account the views of the CYP, parents and school staff, the better the outcomes (Baker & Bishop, 2015). It is further advised that a focus on returning the pupil to school as quickly as possible is more effective.

The pathway on the following few pages offers a stepped response to intervening and is based on the best practice evidence detailed above. The way in which schools offer support following the Assess, Plan, Do, Review cycle is also relevant, and steps are contained within the pathway below.

Some key principles to hold in mind when considering the support offered are encapsulated by the seven S's for success:

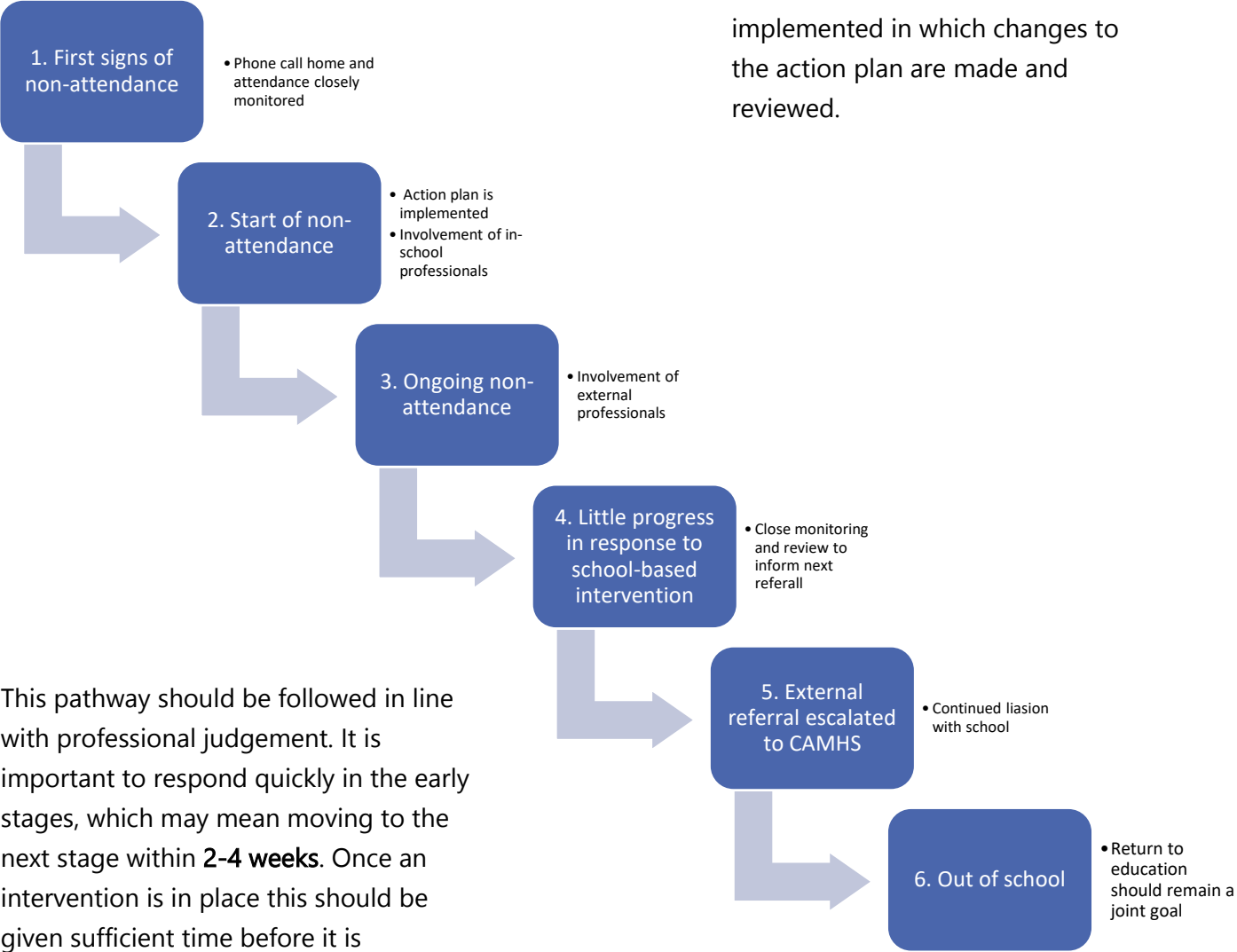


³ Taken from West Sussex County Council 'Educational Psychology Service EBSA Guidance'

Overview of pathway

Preventative actions and support at the whole school level

An ongoing approach of **Plan-Do-Review** should be implemented in which changes to the action plan are made and reviewed.



This pathway should be followed in line with professional judgement. It is important to respond quickly in the early stages, which may mean moving to the next stage within **2-4 weeks**. Once an intervention is in place this should be given sufficient time before it is reviewed, most likely 8-12 weeks, although other aspects of the action plan should continue to be monitored.

Pathway for EBSA

Preventative actions and support at the whole school level

- Systems for early identification of EBSA in school e.g., screening of pupils based on the known risk factors of EBSA, close monitoring of transition groups
- Closer liaison with parents of 'at risk' pupils, and additional resilience building support
- Consideration of CWP/EWP intervention
- Support for parents about managing child anxiety
- Clear, consistent policies related to anti-bullying, relational support, emotional wellbeing
- Training and support for the pastoral team
- Clear responsibilities of senior and pastoral staff in relation to EBSA
- Clear attendance policy that accounts for EBSA

First signs of non-attendance

- Pupil non-attendance triggers a phone call home
- Speak with parents/carers and try to elicit any information that relates to risk factors of EBSA (see pro-forma in Appendix)
- Tutor/pastoral lead has an informal conversation with the young person to identify if they are worried about anything, and to agree any additional check-ins
- Attendance closely monitored by a nominated member of staff, alongside other indicators of increasing anxiety
- If discussions highlight avoidance due to low/ moderate levels of anxiety and there is CWP/ EWP provision in school, encourage CYP to self-refer for guided self-help for anxiety. In schools without this provision consider ELSA, school nurse or other pastoral support

Start of non-attendance - action plan implemented

- Meeting in school with parents and young person
- Gain the views of the young person to try and ascertain the triggers for the avoidance/ anxiety and to identify any maintaining factors
- Action plan agreed and recorded (see Appendix). This could include removing/reducing triggers, 'soft landings' support for transitions, identifying a safe space in school, scripts for parents/carers to use at home (e.g., in the mornings)
- Continuation of anxiety management work with the young person
- All relevant members of school staff made aware of the situation and the consistency of the approach is heavily emphasised
- Signpost parents to support e.g., CWP/EWP webinars (see below for other suggestions).
- Consider Early Help assessment or signposting to Sutton Uplift

Review 2-4 weeks

Ongoing non-attendance – involvement of external professionals

- Involvement of an external professional to support the review and to plan further intervention e.g., EP, EWO
- Further assessment (if/as needed) to identify pupil views; triggers and maintaining factors, learning needs
- Plan for how education will continue e.g., adapt the timetable, increase transitional support, gradual exposure techniques
- Parent support including further training or signposting
- Consider pupil referral to Tier 2 CBT/Off the Record (depending on presenting problem, underlying difficulty, suitability criteria – CWP/EWP team can advise or refer into SPA for assessment)

Review 2-4 weeks (plan, do review cycle)

Little progress in response to school-based intervention

- A school-led intervention has been in place for half a term, but still little progress has been made
- If not already made, referral to Tier 2 CBT/Off the Record (depending on presenting problem, underlying difficulty, suitability criteria)
- Multi-agency response continues, including sending work home, weekly check-ins by school staff to parent/carer and pupil (consider in person where possible)
- Parent support for managing anxiety at home
- School to continue regularly checking in and providing education
- Team around the Child/Family should take place

Review 2-4 weeks (plan, do review cycle)

External referral escalated to CAMHS

- Tier 3 referrals where there is a severe and enduring mental health problem and child and family have shown a commitment to engage in assessment/treatment, but Tier 1 and 2 interventions have been unsuccessful
- Multi-agency response to continue

Review 2-4 weeks (plan, do review cycle)

Out of school

- Agreed schedule of multi-agency meetings, continuing to include school
- Consideration of whether pupil is medically unable to attend school

Emotionally Based School Avoidance – Sutton pathway and guidance document

Contact information for organisations listed above

Organisation	Concern you may make a referral for	Email and phone number
Off the Record Sutton	Anxiety, low mood – counselling support	sutton@talkofftherecord.org 0208 680 8899
Early Help	Family functioning or parenting	
Jigsaw4U	Loss and pre/post bereavement support	clairepowell@jigsaw4u.org.uk 0208 687 1384
Sutton Carers Centre	A young person with caring responsibilities	enquiries@suttoncarerscenre.org 0208 296 5611
Kooth		
Children and Young People’s Wellbeing Team Service YouTube Channel	Recorded workshops, webinars and short videos on various wellbeing topics, for parents/ young people and school staff	YouTube channel Webinar ‘School-based anxiety – Emotionally Related School Avoidance’
SilverCloud	Online therapy programme proven to help with stress, anxiety, low-mood and depression, with courses specifically adapted or young people.	SilverCloud website
School Nursing	Various concerns related to social, emotional and mental health needs	Parent line: 0208 770 5409 Young person line: 0208 770 4409 schoolnursing@sutton.gov.uk

There are also a range of additional documents in the Appendix section of this guide to inform your planning and to offer support. These include:

- ☆ Information gathering pro-forma
- ☆ Assessment – capturing the views of the child or young person
- ☆ Action Plan template
- ☆ Intervention and strategies

Guidance around action planning

As detailed above action planning is an important part of getting a child or young person back into school and needs to be part of a joined-up approach by the school, pupil, parents/carers and any other professionals who are involved. It is important that the action plan is based on a clear understanding of why the school avoidance behaviour has started and what is keeping it going. A template that addresses each of these points is in the appendix and some further considerations to hold in mind are outlined below.

Commitment – it is important that everyone who needs to be involved is, and that everyone is working towards the same aims. In many instances, parents/carers have become increasingly worried about the situation and seeing their child distressed. As detailed in the anxiety and avoidance section of this document, a part of any intervention will be confronting the situation that the child or young person is worried about, and therefore some level of distress will need to be experienced. It is important that everyone is aware of this and accepting of this.

Consistency – confronting a situation that provokes feelings of anxiety will be difficult for a child or young person, and difficult for the adults around them to witness. Pre-planning coping and calming strategies that you can support the child or young person to use, as well as scripts that adults can use when speaking to them is also helpful. Most of all it is important that whatever is agreed is carried out consistently by all adults.

Realistic – it is likely that for all of the adults involved, returning the child or young person back to school as quickly as possible will be the priority. In cases where anxiety is high, and a pupil has been out of school for a prolonged period of time, this will not be achieved. Detailing small-step targets is an important part of action planning, but these need to be realistic and achievable. It will be more helpful to set ten small targets which can be met in a graduated process, rather than three larger targets which are not successfully achieved.

Intervention based on formulation – consider the four ‘purposes’ of EBSA that were listed at the start of this document and try to identify which provides the best explanation for the behaviour the child or young person is displaying. Information in the Appendix provides some general guidance for intervention based on the function of the avoidant behaviour.

Some things you may include in your Action plan

(see Appendix for further details):

Removing or reducing triggers to anxiety

A key adult and time with them at the start and/or end of the day

Work with an ELSA, EWP, school nurse or pastoral member of staff focused on anxiety management

A safe space in school identified

Walking to school with a friend

Additional support for the family

Agreeing a way the pupil can express that they need help

Deciding who the CYP will meet when they arrive at school

Increasing ‘downtime’ during the school day

In almost all cases a return to school as quickly as possible should be the goal

Transition

Although change is a normal part of life, transitions are times when feelings of uncertainty are often experienced because it involves moving from a state of 'known', to being faced with a lot of unknowns. Therefore, even positive transitions; changes that we look forward to, can still feel overwhelming. For some pupils, transitions and changes are more difficult, because the feelings of uncertainty are heightened for them, and their feelings of anxiety can lead to a cycle of avoidance, in this case non-attendance at school.

The principles of 'good' support at times of transition can be summarised by three key principles:

1. **Planning and preparation** – so that everyone involved knows what is going to happen and has the chance to practise any skills that will aid their coping.
2. **Clear communication** – about what to expect to minimise confusion and anxiety, and to clarify expectations.
3. **Relationships** – prioritising the new development of new relationships and utilising those that exist already to provide reassurance and support.

The following provides a few examples of strategies and actions that may fit within each of these key principles at different key stage transfers.

Key issues raised by transitions:

A lack of predictability and unclear expectations

Perceived loss of control

Feelings of uncertainty related to role and identity

The ending of relationships and attachments to people, places and things

Intense emotions that a person may not be equipped to self-regulate

Feeling a lack of self-confidence about how to transfer personal skills and attributes

Uncertainty about the future

	Planning and preparation	Clear communication	Relationships
Year 6 to year 7 transfer	Provide a transition book for parents to complete with their children which covers all the different aspects of secondary school	Communication from the secondary school about the classes, teachers, and timetable in a format accessible to pupils	Time for pupils to get to know others in their form, and their form tutor before formal academic learning begins
Post-16 transfer	Identify pupils who will need an individualised transition plan	An overview timetable of the year featuring key hand-in dates and course requirements	1:1's with a key member of staff at the start of term where the young person's hopes and views can be explored

Useful links and resources

Anxiety Management

Starving the Anxiety Gremlin: A Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Workbook on Anxiety Management for Young People By Kate Collins-Donnelly

What to Do When You Worry Too Much: A Kid's Guide to Overcoming Anxiety By Dawn Huebner

Information about Anxiety [Young Minds](#)

[Mighty Moe](#) by Lacey Woloshyn

[Worksheets](#) for anxiety – Anxiety BC

Anxiety [self help guide](#) – Mood Juice

[Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Skills Training Workbook](#) – Hertfordshire Partnership NHS

Anxiety by Paul Stallard -[Examples of activities](#)

Understanding anxiety and panic attacks - [Mind](#)

The Anxious Child: [A booklet for parents and carers](#) wanting to know more about anxiety in children and young people.

General Emotional Wellbeing & Mental Health Literature

Managing Your Mind: The Mental Fitness Guide By Gillian Butler and Tony Hope (for older young people)

Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life for Teens By Joseph V. Ciarrochi, Louise Hayes and Ann Bailey.

Stuff That Sucks: Accepting what you can't change and committing to what you can By Ben Sedley

Promoting Emotional Resilience - [Toolkit](#)

The Thriving Adolescent: Using Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and Positive Psychology to Help Teens Manage Emotions, Achieve Goals, and Build Connection By Louise Hayes

Feeling Good: Promoting children's mental health - [Centre for Mental Health](#)

Parent survival guide - [YoungMinds](#)

Dealing with Feeling by Tina Rae

I am special by Peter Vermeulon

A Volcano in My Tummy by Elaine Whitehouse and Warwick Pudney

Emotional Literacy assessment and intervention by Southampton Psychology Service. Published by GL Assessment Limited. (Available for both Primary and Secondary)

[MindEd online training](#) on how to support young people with mental health difficulties

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[MindEd for Families](#) - online advice and information to help parents to understand and identify early issues and best support for their child.

Transition

[Securing Good Transitions: A resource pack to support the next steps of Key Stage 4 pupils with SEND | SendGateway](#)

Emotionally Based School Avoidance

Anxiety Related Absence – a guide for practice from National Autism Implementation Team

Children and Young People’s Wellbeing Team Service [YouTube channel](#)

[Webinar](#) ‘School-based anxiety – Emotionally Related School Avoidance’ from the CWP Service

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Information gathering pro-forma

To gain a fuller understanding of the child or young person and their family context the following areas may be useful to gather information about at the first signs of EBSA from parents/carers.

Area of conversation	Example prompt questions
Perspective about the situation	What do you feel is the main area of concern at the moment? Do you feel that your child's view of the situation is the same as yours?
Predisposing factors	What factors may have contributed to the development of the problem? Can you tell me about the child's early experiences of school? How does the child usually cope with change and transition?
Precipitating factors	Can you think what might have triggered the current situation? Have there been any changes or stressors within the family recently? Has your child spoken about anything that has happened or changed in school that has made them worried, upset, unhappy? Can you think of anything that happened a long time ago that may have resurfaced as an issue for your child recently?
Perpetuating factors	What factors might be contributing to the problem continuing? Is there anything that the child enjoys about staying at home? What would a typical day look like when they have refused to go to school? Are there things at school that your child talks about being relieved that they don't need to do if they are at home?
Protective factors	What do you feel are your child's strengths? What has helped in previous situations which they have found difficult or become worried? Have there been times when your child has managed to go to school even when they have been very worried? What was different about that time?
Relationships in school	Does your child speak about other children from school? Do you feel they have a group of close friends? Have they fallen out with any close friends recently? Has your child spoken about being bullied by anyone? Do they mention any particular teachers – either positively or negatively?
School work	How do you feel your child is managing with their schoolwork? Do you feel they have any additional needs that have not been identified, or are not being supported? Do they mention any particular subjects – either positively or negatively?

Emotionally Based School Avoidance – Sutton pathway and guidance document

Assessment – capturing the views of the child or young person

It is important to ensure that the wishes and feelings of the pupil remain central to any and all planning that is occurring to get them back into school. The following are some suggested activities and resources that could be used by a member of staff who has a good relationship with the child or young person to ascertain their views. When deciding how to gain the views of the pupil, their age and developmental level must be carefully considered.

Using visuals

- Use a numbered scale, or a scale of faces
- Use an anxiety thermometer so the child can rate the intensity of emotions they feel for different parts of the school day/in different parts of the school building
- Use Talking Mats to provide a way of gaining the child's views about a variety of factors that could be contributing, or to order factors in a hierarchy (e.g., biggest concern to least concern)
- Ask a child to draw out how they feel about school
- RAG rate a timetable to identify lessons or times of the day that they are more worried about

Unpick the thoughts (seek further guidance from EP or other professional if needed)

- Ask the child if they can identify the thoughts that are making them worried
- What are the 'red' thoughts that pop into their head?
- Are their thoughts the most likely outcome, or could they try and consider a more balanced thought?

Solution focused questioning

- If the child woke up tomorrow and all their problems had gone away, what would be different?
- If they were the headteacher of the school what would they change?
- When do they feel less worried about school? What is different at those times?

Questionnaire measures

- Revised Child Anxiety and Depression Scale (RCADS). Young person and parent versions which measure five sub-scales and a total anxiety score.
 - [Parent version](#)
 - [Young person version \(aged 8-18\)](#)
- *School Refusal Assessment Scale – Revised*. Young person and parent versions. Explores four functions of school refusal/ avoidance (Kearney and Albano, 2007)
 - [Parent version](#)
 - [Young person version](#)
- Parent Views about Anxiety Questionnaire is a [parent-report inventory](#) that aims to assess parents' beliefs about their child's anxiety.

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Action Plan template
<p><i>Baseline description of the behaviour</i></p> <p>What is the current rate of attendance? Are there any patterns that have been identified?</p> <p>What does the anxiety look like?</p>
<p><i>Review of the behaviour (to be completed at subsequent meetings)</i></p>
<p><i>Risk factors (e.g., predisposing, precipitating, perpetuating – child, family, school) – factors keeping them away from school</i></p>
<p><i>Strengths and protective factors – factors encouraging them to attend school</i></p>
<p><i>Formulation</i></p> <p>What is the function of the behaviour (e.g., to avoid something)?</p>
<p><i>Child/young person's view of the situation and hopes/goals</i></p> <p>What would they like to happen? How likely to do they feel this is? What do they feel are the main factors contributing to their anxiety?</p>
<p><i>Parent view</i></p>
<p><i>Support plan</i></p> <p>e.g., key adult identified, changes to timetable, safe space, plan for the start of the day, anxiety management intervention or CWP/ EWP intervention?</p>
<p><i>Review date</i></p>

Emotionally Based School Avoidance – Sutton pathway and guidance document

Strategies and support for an action plan

Practical

- Start of the day plan identified
- Agree a Plan B – what to do if the initial plan doesn't work
- 'Soft landing' that makes the transition at the start of the day easier e.g., going into a fun activity rather than a lesson, coming in for breakfast club
- Safe space identified
- Address/reduce any practical triggers
- Timetable reduced/personalised
- Additional support for lessons which are rated red on a RAG'd timetable
- Reduction in homework/academic demands
- Agreement about how changes in timetable or staffing will be communicated to the pupil
- Morning routine for home clarified
- Rewards to work towards identified and a chart/visual to be created
- Home visits if appropriate
- Provide additional learning support if needed
- Create as much predictability in the school day as possible
- Plan for break and lunchtimes – more routine, a club rather than the playground, buddy system etc.

Relational

- First interaction of the day planned for
- Key adult identified
- Way of child contacting the key adult agreed
- Arrangements for check-in's agreed
- Friend to meet at the school gates
- Information for all staff about how to support/what not to do
- Agreement of a sign to use to indicate to teachers that the child isn't feeling ok and/or a time out card
- Plan created to resolve any peer difficulties
- Create a special responsibility for the child which is motivating for them

Anxiety management

- Anxiety management intervention by ELSA, CWP/EWP, school nurse, school counsellor etc.
- Breaks and activities throughout the day to lower anxiety levels
- Relaxation strategies to be practised and reminded at home
- Child taught to recognise the first signs that they are becoming worried
- Detail calming strategies adults in school can remind the child to use
- Graduated exposure hierarchy created and used to plan small steps to returning to school
- Increased sensory breaks

Emotionally Based School Avoidance – Sutton pathway and guidance document

Intervention and strategies related to the four functions of EBSA

The numbers in the Function column link to the four reasons for school avoidance identified by Kearney and Silverman (1990) and detailed in full at the start of the document.

Function	Type of support	Aims of support
1. School phobia – to avoid something that causes stress/worry	<p>Psychoeducation (CBT approaches) to teach how anxiety/worry affects our thinking, feeling and behaviour, and how avoidance makes us feel worse</p> <p>Physical relaxation and calming strategies</p> <p>Gradual re-exposure</p> <p>Self-reinforcement (positive self-talk / recognising efforts)</p>	<p>Reducing physical symptoms</p> <p>Improve coping skills</p>
2. Social anxiety – to avoid difficult social situations	<p>Psychoeducation about anxiety (as above but in relation to social situations)</p> <p>Physical relaxation and calming strategies</p> <p>Role play and real-life practice</p> <p>Identifying and challenging unhelpful thoughts and thinking patterns</p>	<p>Build social skills</p> <p>Reduce social anxiety</p> <p>Reducing physical symptoms</p> <p>Improve coping skills</p>
3. Separation anxiety – to get attention or time with significant others	<p>Parent training – rewards, positive attention</p> <p>Psychoeducation of parents ('being brave' not avoiding distress, consider the future, how to manage school avoidant behaviours)</p> <p>Routines and reward planning</p>	<p>Enable parents to take control at home and provide them with skills to cope with non-compliance</p> <p>Shift attention to positive behaviours</p>
4. Truancy – to spend time out of school doing something fun	<p>Family agreements</p> <p>Problem solving training e.g., how to refuse peers</p> <p>Improve experience of school</p>	<p>Reduce family conflict</p> <p>Increase rewards for going to school</p> <p>Decrease rewards for missing school</p>

Emotionally Based School Avoidance – Sutton pathway and guidance document

Talking Mats resource

True for me

Not true for me

The following table lists the statements and icons found on the talking mats:

Statement	Icon
I need help with my learning	Person with book
I feel like I belong at my school	Two people
My family need me to be at home	House
I don't know how to make friends	Person with hand
I prefer to spend time with my family or pets	Family and dog
I worry that my family will get ill	Ambulance
I worry about people getting too close to me	Person with hand
I worry about leaving my parents/carer to go to school	Family
I feel worried	Worried face
I can do things if I really try	Bicep
I worry about seeing my classmates	Two people
I feel lonely	Lonely face
I worry about schoolwork	Books
I don't like working in a group	Group of people
I don't like changes to routine	Exclamation mark and question mark
I am a good learner	Person with laptop
I think things will get better	Rainbow
I want to go to school	School building
I feel my head is too full	Head with brain
People don't listen or believe me	Person with hand
There are people who help me at school	Person with hand
I don't like some teachers	Teacher
Some children are mean to me	Angry face
I would rather spend time on my games or watch TV	Game controller and TV
I worry about getting ill	Sick face
I believe people care about me at school	Person with hand
I prefer to spend time doing fun stuff at home	Skateboard
I feel embarrassed	Embarrassed face
I would rather be at home	House
I have friends at school	Two people
I don't like breaktimes	Clock
I feel mixed up	Mixed up face
School is too noisy or busy	Noisy face
I worry about tests	Person with pencil
I don't like reading aloud	Open book
I worry about what people think about me	Three faces
I don't like understanding what the teacher is saying	Person with hand
I feel safe when I am at school	Sun and cloud
People listen to me at school	Ear
I feel sad	Sad face