



Cognus

No Limits on Learning

Educational Psychology Service

# Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA)

Guidance document for schools and professionals in Sutton

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## Introduction

### Guidance development

This current guidance<sup>1</sup> was originally created in October 2021 in response to local need to provide clarity around the different roles of professionals involved, and to identify best practice for students experiencing EBSA. It was a joined-up process between Sutton CAMHS, Sutton Tuition and Reintegration Service (STARS) and Cognus Educational Psychology Service.

This guidance has been updated as of Spring 2023 by Cognus Educational Psychology Service to recognise the level of work by schools and professionals in the local area to support children and young people's engagement in education. Therefore, the following document will provide the theoretical and psychological underpinnings of EBSA, drawing upon the relevant research, whilst also providing practical solutions and real-life examples of best practice implemented by schools in Sutton.

### Importance of attendance

Schools have a legal duty to monitor student attendance daily and to inform the local authority of any student who is regularly absent from school or who has missed 10 or more school days without authorisation. School attendance is highly regarded as important for longer term outcomes for young people. Non-attendance is associated with difficulties in employment, development of life skills, and psychiatric difficulties. In May 2022, the DfE produced guidance<sup>2</sup> for schools to improve school attendance with an emphasis on creating a calm, orderly, safe, and supportive environment where all pupils want to be and are keen and ready to learn. The DfE recognised that some pupils find it harder than others to attend due to a range of factors and therefore targeted support is required in some cases.

### Impact of Covid-19

The [Department for Education survey](#) of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) in the summer term 2021 found that around a fifth of all schools inspected that term were experiencing more attendance issues than they would normally see. The three most common reasons for absence were that:

- pupils were anxious
- pupils or parents had specific health needs, including those identified at that time as clinically vulnerable or extremely clinically vulnerable
- pupils had disengaged from education during the pandemic.

It appears that the provision of remote education during national lockdowns has negatively affected some pupils' perceptions of the need to be in school, particularly in secondary schools. Schools continue to report increased requests from parents for elective home education, as do local authorities. While these may not be as high as they were at the peak of the pandemic, they continue to be higher than usual in many schools.



Department  
for Education

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

<sup>2</sup>[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1099677/Working\\_together\\_to\\_improve\\_school\\_attendance.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1099677/Working_together_to_improve_school_attendance.pdf)

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

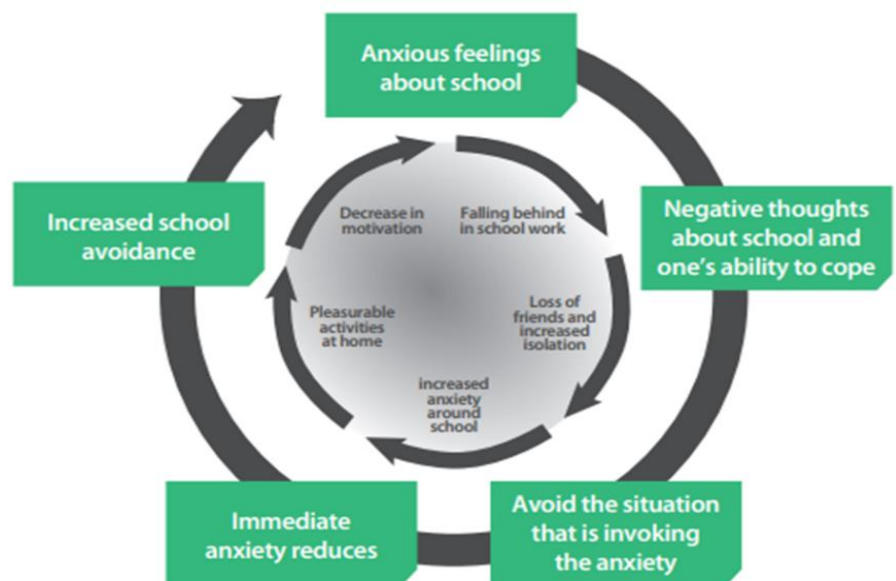
EBSA is a term used to describe children and young people (CYP) who have severe difficulty in attending school due to emotional factors, often resulting in prolonged absences from school (Thambirajah, Grandison and De-Hayes 2008). EBSA can be a difficulty for pupils of all ages and in all forms of educational settings. Whilst some CYP stop attending school overnight, for most, the pattern of non-attendance and avoidance occurs gradually, over time. In many instances, the CYP want to attend, even if they feel unable to do so. It is therefore important to be aware of the risk factors, early indicators, and pathways of support to remove barriers and promote engagement in education.

Terminology ranges within the literature: persistent absenteeism, school refusal, school phobia, children missing education, and truancy. Many are moving away from the language of 'refuser' as this implies that the CYP has full control over their non-attendance, and locates the 'problem' within the CYP, minimising other factors that will have led to the avoidance and be maintaining the situation. It is also important to take into account the wider environment of a CYP, than solely a 'within child' understanding of anxiety, for most effective intervention plans. EBSA is different to truancy which refers to non-attendance at school undertaken without parental/carer knowledge. Emotionally related school non-attendance may be used.

### Anxiety and avoidance

Whilst a certain level of anxiety is normal and helpful (we actually do better in some situations with some anxiety), pervasive anxiety that inhibits us in any aspect of our lives is unhelpful for our wellbeing.

Models of anxiety are familiar with the concept of avoidance which can exacerbate the problem, as shown in the diagram.



1. A CYP experiences anxiety or uncomfortableness as a result of a school situation.
2. Avoidance of the situation (e.g. not going to school) provides short-term relief.
3. The next time the CYP is faced with the situation (e.g. the next school day), the feelings of anxiety are more intense than the initial feelings.
4. The cycle then continues as the more intense feelings of anxiety are harder to manage, and over time the anxiety increases.
5. Further to this, the longer a pupil is out of education, the increase in secondary maintenance factors occur (disruption to friendships/ missed learning), which increased their worry and their desire to stay at home.

Adults may unintentionally reinforce school avoidance by what is perceived as ‘rescuing’ the CYP from the uncomfortable feelings brought on by attending school. For example, agreeing for them to stay at home because of how they are feeling. Consequently, the CYP remembers the intensity of their feelings about the situation and their avoidance strategy is therefore reinforced. However, if all adults encourage school attendance, the CYP is more likely to remember the success of attending, experience a reduction of anxiety and therefore attendance is more likely promoted.

### Functions of school avoidance

The factors surrounding a CYP who is not attending school will vary so widely it is important that individual understandings are sought. In a review of the literature surrounding school avoidance, Kearney and Silverman (1990) defined four main themes that cause school avoidance behaviours for CYP. For some CYP more than one of the factors may be at play, but for most there is a primary factor that provides the best explanation. It is important to gather information to explore the primary function.



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 (e.g. pulling the child away from school), and the final two in which factors outside of school are **positively reinforcing** the avoidance (e.g. pushing them towards home) (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.

Click the [link](#) to complete the school avoidance scale questionnaire to explore the priority function of their avoidance.

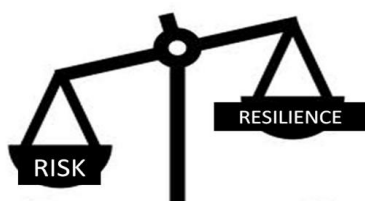
### Risk and resilience factors of EBSA

Resilience can be described as the positive factors that are ‘pushing’ the CYP towards attending school which are helpful to identify as these are strengths which can support the CYP. Alternatively, risks can be described as the negative factors that are ‘pulling’ the CYP away from attending school and it is helpful to identify these potential barriers so that targeted support can be put in place. Whilst many CYP will have experienced some of the risk factors below, not all will result in school avoidance. It can often be the case that it is the accumulation of multiple risk factors that exacerbate the problem.

It is important to gather information to gain an understanding of the risk and resiliency factors; the following table provides an overview.

Factors within school	Factors related to the family context	Individual factors within a child
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bullying</li> <li>• Difficulties in specific subject</li> <li>• Transition to secondary school, key stage or change of school</li> <li>• Structure of school day</li> <li>• Academic demands/high levels of pressure and performance-orientated classrooms</li> <li>• Journey to school</li> <li>• Exams</li> <li>• Peer or staff difficulties</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Separation/divorce or change in family dynamic</li> <li>• Parent physical and mental health problems</li> <li>• Overprotective parenting style</li> <li>• Dysfunctional family interactions</li> <li>• Being the youngest child in the family</li> <li>• Loss and bereavement</li> <li>• High levels of family stress</li> <li>• Family history of EBSA</li> <li>• Young carer</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Temperamental style-withdrawal from unfamiliar settings/people</li> <li>• Fear of failure and poor self confidence</li> <li>• Physical illness</li> <li>• Age (5-6, 11-12, 13-14)</li> <li>• Learning difficulties, or Autism if unidentified or unsupported</li> <li>• Separation anxiety from parent</li> <li>• Traumatic events</li> </ul>

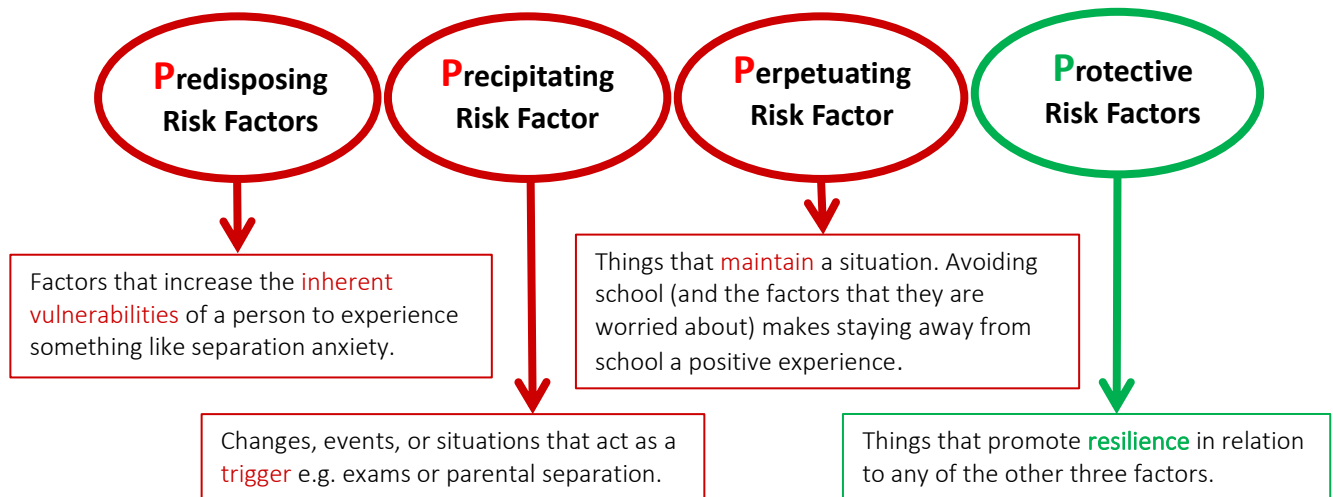
As is the case with most elements of emotional wellbeing, resilience is a consequence of the balance of risk and protective factors. If a young person is experiencing a lot of risk factors but at the same time a number of protective factors, this may result in them having the resilient resources to cope. 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. It is important to consider the individual differences as they relate to a person’s risk and resilience.



Click the [link](#) to complete the risk and resiliency questionnaire

### The Four Ps

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:



Area of conversation	Example prompt questions
<b>Predisposing factors</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What factors may have contributed to the development of the problem?</li> <li>• Can you tell me about the child’s early experiences of school?</li> <li>• How does the child usually cope with change and transition?</li> </ul>
<b>Precipitating factors</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can you think what might have triggered the current situation?</li> <li>• Have there been any changes or stressors within the family recently?</li> <li>• Has your child spoken about anything that has happened or changed in school that has made them worried, upset, unhappy?</li> </ul>
<b>Perpetuating factors</b> → <b><u>REDUCE THESE</u></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What factors might be contributing to the problem continuing?</li> <li>• Is there anything that the child enjoys about staying at home?</li> <li>• What would a typical day look like when they have refused to go to school?</li> </ul>
<b>Protective factors</b> → <b><u>INCREASE AND BUILD UPON THESE</u></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do you feel are your child’s strengths?</li> <li>• What has helped in previous situations which they have found difficult?</li> <li>• 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?</li> </ul>

Use these questions to inform your discussions with parents



## Capturing the views of the child or young person

It is important to ensure the wishes and feelings of the CYP remain central to all planning 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 CYP to ascertain their views. When deciding how to gain the views of the pupil, their age and developmental level must be carefully considered. It is also imperative that action is taken on the basis of what the child has said, otherwise trust between them and the school will be further eroded.

### 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 their child's views about a variety of factors that could be contributing, or to order factors in a hierarchy.
- RAG rate a timetable to identify lessons/times of the day that they are more worried about
- School wellbeing cards – [see link](#)

### 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 unhelpful/'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

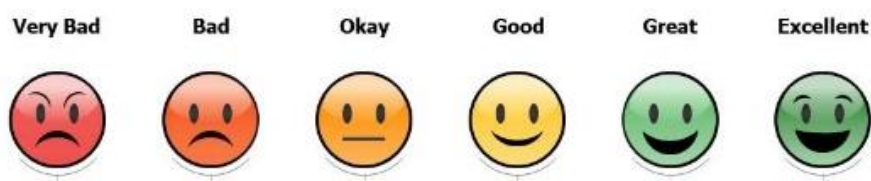
- If the child woke up tomorrow and all their problems had gone away, what would be different?
- If they were the headteacher of the school what would they change?
- When do they feel less worried about school? What is different at those times?

### 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](#) and [Young person version \(aged 8-18\)](#)

### Workbook

- Cognus EP workbook for children experiencing EBSA (<https://www.cognus.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Cognus-EBSA-guidance-for-children.pdf>)
- 'The Ideal Safe School' activity found [here](#)





## Autism and anxiety

Although there is little research evidence available, anecdotally it is understood that CYP 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

- 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
- Difficulties arising from poor executive functioning – the ability to plan, organise, and complete tasks and have equipment (e.g. PE kit).

**Autistic CYP can adopt masking;** a strategy to minimise the visibility of their autism in social situations. This is particularly common in females and those with average – above average intelligence. This means that they may present as managing in school, although underneath they can be experiencing significant levels of emotional distress. Overtime, this can lead to burnout and exhaustion and consequently the CYP finds it very difficult to attend school.

**But we don't see it in school?** Parents may often spot the warning signs before school staff do; therefore it is important to accept and be pro-active to parental concerns regarding potential masking. Responding early to 'dislike' and expressions of unhappiness about school is imperative.

## WHAT IS MASKING?

@21andsensory



**THIS CAN LEAD TO AUTISTIC BURNOUT+ SENSORY HANGOVER**

Click the [link](#) for a research study on key actions for supporting autistic CYP experiencing EBSA

## 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.

### 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

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

	Planning and preparation	Clear communication	Relationships
<b>Year 6 to year 7 transfer</b>	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
<b>Post-16 transfer</b>	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

Have you thought about summer holiday workshops, transition classes, journey planning, visual maps, colour coded timetables, social groups, one-page profiles or checklists?

## Graduated response to EBSA

With the increase in prevalence of EBSA and attendance becoming a high priority for schools in the local area, it is important to ensure that schools are adopting best practice approaches. Research continues to highlight the importance of preventative measures when supporting CYP, and the Code of Practice highlights the importance of adopting the graduated response as a model for provision in school.

Therefore, schools should be ensuring appropriate universal support is in place at a whole school level, appropriate measures are in place for identifying 'at risk' students, and finally that there is a robust, evidence-informed intervention plan for those experiencing significant difficulty with attending school.

### Prevention at a whole school level

There is much that schools can do at a whole school level to promote wellbeing and school attendance and ultimately aim to prevent EBSA occurring. It is important for school to evaluate their whole school practices to consider ways in which to provide further support in this area.

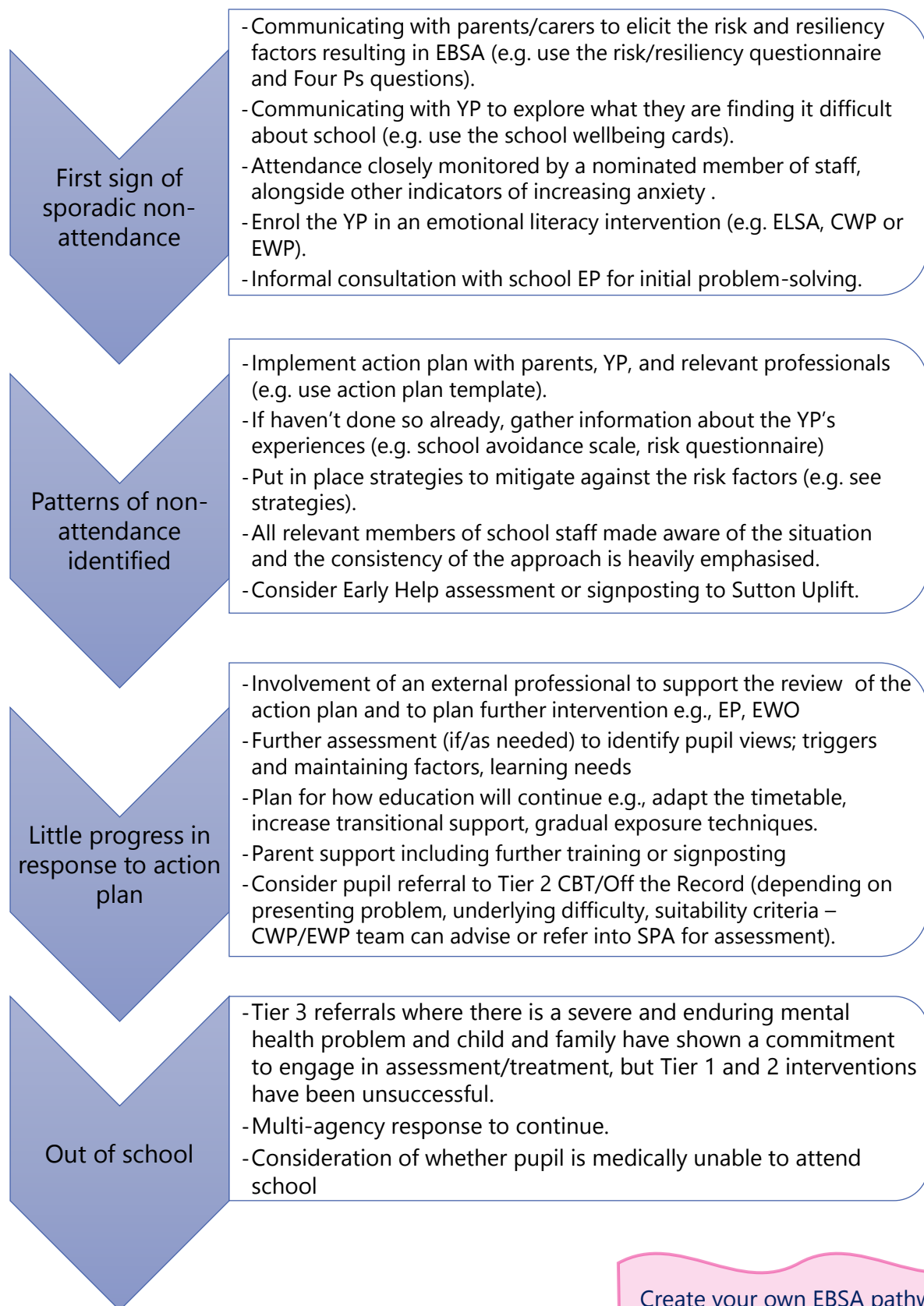
Complete the [self-evaluation tool](#) to identify areas of focus for your school.

Examples include:

- Practices embedded to prioritise wellbeing for all staff and students (see [link](#) for Anna Freud five steps to whole school wellbeing).
- Valuing pupil and parent voice and ways in which to develop positive relationships.
- Whole school training to raise awareness of EBSA amongst all staff.
- Developing an EBSA policy, in line with the graduated response, utilising the resources within this document.
- Nominating a lead person for EBSA in school.
- 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
- Parent workshops to raising awareness of anxiety and EBSA.
- Interventions targeted to supporting EBSA students.
- Utilising agencies for wellbeing intervention such as CWP/EWP.

The pathway on the following page offers a stepped response to intervening. 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. This pathway should begin at the earliest signs of patterns of non-attendance.





Create your own EBSA pathway; [see example](#) from All Saints Benhilton Primary School.

Figure 1: EBSA pathway

## Action Planning

Research indicates that the quicker the reasons for 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.

Action planning is an important part of getting a CYP back into school and needs to be part of a joined-up approach by the school, CYP, 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.

### Key element of action planning:

- It is important that there is a **commitment** from everyone who needs to be involved, and that everyone is working towards the same aims.
- Most of all it is important there is **consistency** of agreed strategies by all adults (and school senior leaders). Ensure all staff are informed about the young person's difficulties and agreed strategies.
- Whilst everyone will want the CYP back to school as quickly as possible, it is important to be **realistic** in setting the pace of intervention; 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.
- **Regular contact** between home school e.g. telephone calls with parents/carers and the key worker in school. Agree realistic expectations regarding frequency.
- Early **home visits** to discuss the YP's difficulty with attending school.
- Consider whether a family assessment such as Early Help can provide further support.

### Good practice examples in Sutton

Glenthorne High School have commissioned the EP service to deliver a small group EBSA intervention for YP with 70-80% attendance.

Greenshaw High School have developed a checklist for Heads of Years to follow when noticing first signs of non-attendance.

Oaks Park High School have created a PowerPoint to disseminate to staff to raise awareness of EBSA.

Please click the [link](#) for research on five key themes for fostering a successful return to school.

## Emotionally Based School Avoidance – Sutton pathway and guidance document

Suggested strategies you may include in your action plan, based on area of identified need

### Relational factors

- Walking to school with a friend.
- A key adult and time with them at the start/end of the day.
- Arrangements for check-ins and the adult to be available when needed.
- Additional support for the family.
- Relationships with staff members maintained e.g. phone-calls and emails home.
- Teachers to demonstrate an interest in the CYP (using PACE principles).



### Emotional factors

- Work with an ELSA, EWP, school nurse or pastoral staff focused on anxiety management.
- Agreeing a way the pupil can express that they need help.
- Relaxation strategies to be practised and reminded at home and school.
- Increasing 'downtime' during the school day.
- Small steps agreed for gradual exposure to situation.
- Safe space identified.
- '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.
- All teaching staff to be aware of emotional needs and co-regulatory strategies agreed e.g. use of emotion coaching.



### Sensory factors

- Use a robust measure to gain an overview of sensory sensitivities and triggers (e.g. the Sensory Profile or contacting the OT service).
- The Just Eight Programme is a self-regulatory programme that uses a colour system to help students recognise triggers and work towards regulating themselves.
- Adjustments such as flexibility in uniform, low stimulation workstation, ear defenders, review lighting and acoustics, staggered arrangements for lunchtimes and sensory breaks.
- Allowance to leave lessons two minutes early to avoid busy corridors.
- Lunch and breaktimes in a smaller quieter part of the school.



### Social factors

- Explore the CYP's views of their inclusivity in school e.g. using the School Membership Scale or Social Inclusion Survey. The school's link EP may be able to provide further information.
- School based intervention for social factors may include peer/buddy system, mentoring, friendship groups, Circle of Friends, self-esteem groups, alternative arrangement for social times or opportunities to rehearse social scenarios in a safe space.



### Academic factors

- Ensure clear identification of learning needs and ensure appropriate support.
- Take a flexible approach such as dropping certain subjects, being excluded from reading aloud in class, reducing homework demands, and higher levels of differentiation.
- Ensure all staff are aware of the CYP's learning profile and agreed strategies.





## Emotionally Based School Avoidance – Sutton pathway and guidance document

- Additional support for lessons which are rated red on a RAG'd timetable.
- The CYP may need one-to-one or small group interventions e.g. for literacy.
- Short-term timetable amendments if one subject is provoking high levels of stress.

### Factors related to change

- Create as much predictability in the school day as possible.
- Offer transition programmes including maps, tours, and photographs.
- Listing 'what if' scenarios and developing possible solutions.
- Social stories to prepare for new social situations.
- Identifying a key person who will be available to support.
- Timetables and checklists for each day, going through the structures of the day and what to expect.



### Family factors

- Consider a referral to a family support team with agreement of the family.
- Set up multidisciplinary group to review support.
- Regular contact with the family to tailor and review support.
- Consider drawing up 'contracts' with parents/carers which are achievable and genuine.



### Factors to consider for CYP who have not been in school for a sustained time

- Staff to ensure daily contact with home to maintain the relationship.
- Considering alternative educational options e.g. sending work home and teachers providing feedback on work completed and offering tutoring.
- Adaptations of emotional wellbeing provision e.g. support within the home.
- Very small steps agreed over time e.g. going to school gate and back.
- Being highly consistent and patient; a return to school will likely take a very long time with very small steps of success.



### External services available for EBSA support in Sutton

The below provides a summary of the support available within the local area to support EBSA. It is important these services are sought in addition to the action planning and pathway process.

- STARS ReThink Project is a school-led, small group intervention, empowering parents.
- EWPs/CWPs provide clinical, evidence-based interventions for children and young people and parents and carers, as well as consultations to school staff.
- Jisaw4U provide whole family support for 50 children.
- Targeted Early Help provide whole family support from a Specialist Support Worker following completion of an EHAT and family plan.
- CAMHS/Off the record provide targeted short-term therapy or counselling.
- Cognus EP service offer group and one to one intervention as part of their traded offer.

You can use the [Action Plan Template](#), adapted by Greenshaw High School



### **Intervention based on formulation.**

Consider the four 'functions' of EBSA that were listed at the start of this document and try to identify which provides the best explanation for the behaviour the CYP is displaying, and consequently tailored intervention can be put in place.

The first two functions of school avoidance will need to ensure that intervention focuses on [adaptations within the school environment](#).

#### **Function 1: Avoiding uncomfortable feelings brought on by attending school**

- Reassure and encourage the CYP that anxiety is a natural, normal feeling that everyone experiences. Talking to the CYP about how anxiety feels in the body and calming strategies such as deep breathing and visualisation.
- They are likely to need support to manage their own emotions, perhaps through pastoral support within school or a therapeutic intervention.
- Read books with CYP to develop their understanding of anxiety and how it impacts on them. For example, the Cognus EP service EBSA Guidance for children; 'What to Do When You Worry Too Much' by Dawn Huebner.
- Develop an action plan with small steps for gradual exposure. Tell the CYP they are brave for going to school and celebrating every small step they complete towards going back.
- Ensure that the CYP receives positive messages that school is safe and supportive so there is a shared and consistent message from school and home.
- Develop scripts for parents to use in the morning routine the CYP is experiencing anxiety to validate and normalise how they are feeling. For example, "I know you're feeling worried, and it can be scary. I can feel worried sometimes too. Let's follow the plan we agreed yesterday, and we can talk about it tonight".

#### **Function 2: Avoiding social and evaluative situations that might be stressful**

- Provide time for the CYP to learn about anxiety (as above), in particular, social anxiety.
- Speak to the CYP about social skills and provide opportunities for them to practise in real life social situations e.g. developing scripts to talk to peers and manage disputes.
- Support for social inclusion e.g. Circle of Friends, Buddy systems, and lunch-time clubs.
- Discuss the CYP's concerns, and if they are demonstrating 'what if' thinking e.g. 'what if everyone laughs at me', or 'what if I fail the exam', follow up with gentle questions to help them reframe their thinking such as 'what's the chance that will happen?' and 'what's the worst-case scenario if it did, and is it really that bad?'
- Make adaptations to support the stressful situation e.g. differentiation in their learning, adjustments to exam situations, or a social club.
- Access to catch up tutoring or pre-teaching.

Remember to use the [school avoidance scale](#) to identify the function.

The latter two functions of school avoidance will need to ensure that intervention has an additional focus on [adaptations at home](#) and school will need to support parent/carers with implementing the following.

### **Function 3: Avoiding school to reduce separation anxiety**

- Provide time for the CYP to learn about anxiety (as above).
- Enhance the CYP's sense of belonging and connection in school e.g. post-card home.
- Provide a secondary attachment figure in school who can be available.
- Consider transitional objects to 'hold in mind' the parent whilst in school.
- Support home to provide highly structured and consistent morning and evening routines even if they are not currently in school so they have a secure framework to live around. They should be waking up 90-120 minutes before school starts.
- Encourage parents to establish positive and individual time to spend with the CYP outside school hours and limit the attention they receive when they do not attend school.
- Establish rewards for attending school and appropriate consequences if they do not.
- Be aware of behaviours that adults can do to unintentionally reinforce school avoidance. For example, jumping in too quickly to 'rescue' them from uncomfortable feelings, or providing high levels of reassurance which prevent the child developing coping skills. Therefore, support families to avoid being overprotective (e.g. always allowing them to stay at home). They need to see that adults have confidence in them and believe that school is a safe and supportive environment for them to attend.

### **Function 4: Avoiding school to pursue rewards outside of school**

- Increasing 'rewards' for attendance and disincentives for nonattendance. This can be negotiated using a 'contract' for everyone to agree.
- Making school as stimulating as possible, using their interests.
- During school time, when the CYP is at home, support families to ensure the day represents school as much as possible so that home does not become a motivating factor. For example, sticking to school timings and completing activities at a table, whilst removing motivating activities such as TV or computer games.
- Encourage parents to speak positively about the benefits of being in school.
- Try to be calm, supportive, and consistent when communicating with the CYP about school, acknowledging their concerns and referring to the contract which will need to be reviewed periodically to ensure it remains relevant and achievable.

Click the [link](#) for further advice in supporting parents of children experiencing EBSA.

Click the [link](#) for DfE best practice case study examples of successful return to education.

Appendix

**School avoidance scale**

**Name:**

**Date completed:**

This questionnaire asks questions about why you don't want to go to school. For each question, pick one number that best describes the last few days. After you answer one question, go to the next. Don't skip any questions. There are no right or wrong answers, just pick the number that best fits the way you feel about school.

	Statements	Never	Seldom	Some times	Half the time	Usually	Almost always	Always
		0	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	How often do you have bad feelings about school because you are afraid of something related to school (tests, school bus, teacher, fire alarm)?							
2	How often do you stay away from school because it is hard to speak with the other students at school?							
3	How often do you feel you would rather be with your parents than go to school?							
4	When you are not in school during the week (Monday to Friday), how often do you leave the house and do something fun?							
5	How often do you stay away from school because you will feel sad or depressed if you go?							
6	How often do you stay away from school because you feel embarrassed in front of other people at school?							
7	How often do you think about your parents or family when in school?							
8	When you are not in school during the week (Monday to Friday), how often do you talk to or see other people (other than your family)?							
9	How often do you feel worse at school (scared, nervous, or sad) compared to how you feel at home with friends?							
10	How often do you stay away from school because you do not have friends there?							
11	How much would you rather be with your family than go to school?							
12	When you are not in school during the week (Monday to Friday), how much do you enjoy doing different things (being with friends or going places)?							
13	How often do you have bad feelings about school (scared, nervous, sad) when you think about school on Saturday and Sunday?							
14	How often do you stay away from certain places in school (hallways, places where certain people are) where you would have to talk to someone?							
15	How much would you rather be taught by your parents at home than by your teacher at school?							
16	How often do you refuse to go to school because you want to have fun outside of school?							

## Emotionally Based School Avoidance – Sutton pathway and guidance document

	Statements	Never	Seldom	Some times	Half the time	Usually	Almost always	Always
		0	1	2	3	4	5	6
17	If you had less bad feelings about school (scared, nervous, sad) would it be easier for you to go to school?							
18	If it were easier for you to make friends, would it be easier for you to go to school?							
19	Would it be easier for you to go to school if your parents went with you?							
20	Would it be easier for you to go to school if you could do more things you like to do after school hours (being with friends)?							
21	How much more do you have bad feelings about school (for example, scared, nervous, or sad) compared to other kids your age?							
22	How often do you stay away from people at school compared to other kids your age?							
23	Would you like to be home with your parents more than other kids your age would?							
24	Would you rather be doing fun things outside of school more than most kids your age?							

### Interpreting the results

In the following table, the numbers in each of the four columns correspond to the question number on the questionnaire.

- Write the score for each question next to the number.
- Total each column for the total score.
- Divide the total by six for the mean score.
- Order the four columns in order of highest number to lowest number. The column with the highest mean score can be interpreted as the prevent reason for school avoidance and therefore tailored intervention can be provided.

	<b>To avoid uncomfortable feelings brought on by attending school</b>	<b>To avoid situations that might be stressful</b>	<b>To reduce separation anxiety</b>	<b>To pursue tangible reinforces outside of school</b>
	1	2	3	4
	5	6	7	8
	9	10	11	12
	13	14	15	16
	17	18	19	20
	21	22	23	24
<b>Total score:</b>				
<b>Mean score:</b>				
<b>Relative rank:</b>				

**EBSA Risk and resiliency questionnaire**

**Name:**

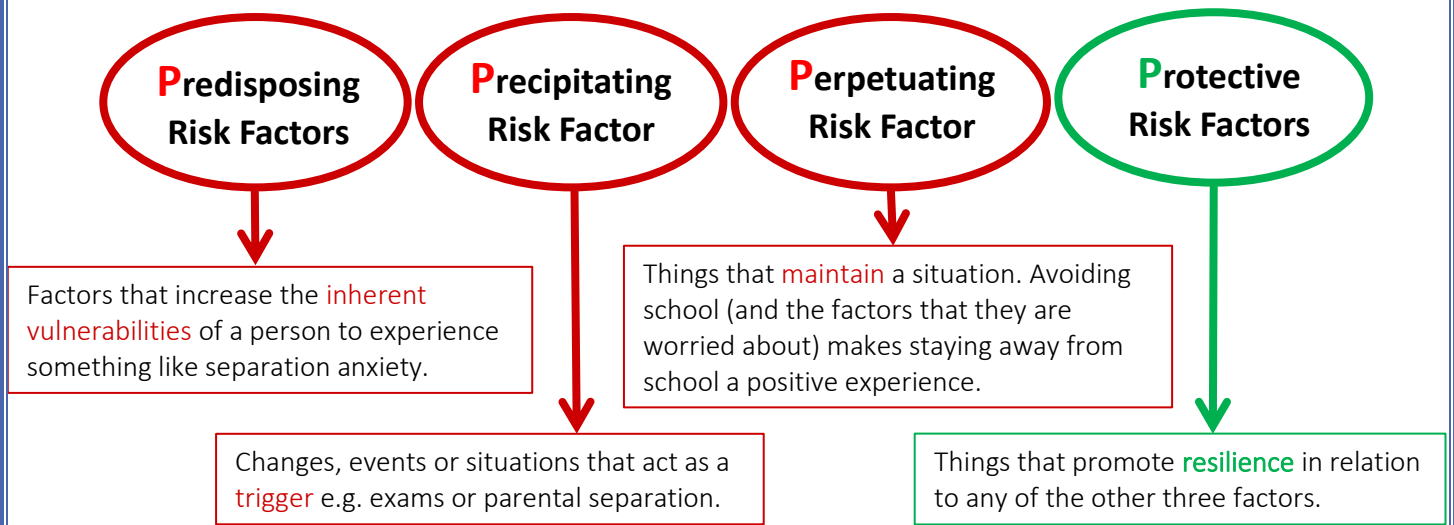
**Date completed:**

This questionnaire is intended to be completed by a school member that knows the CYP well. The risk factors are grouped under three headings: school, family, and individual factors.

Read through each section and tick on the left-hand side the factors which relate to the young person. On the right side, provide a description of the impact these factors currently have on the young person’s engagement in learning.

<b>✓ Statements</b>	<b>How does this impact on the CYP’s engagement in school?</b>
<b>School</b>	
Experienced a recent transition (school, year-group, or teacher)	
Difficulty in peer relationships and/or experiencing bullying.	
Challenge in relationships with staff members.	
Challenge in specific subjects.	
Difficulty in accessing the curriculum, behind in age-related expectations.	
Exam anxiety	
Reluctance to engage in school activities.	
Patterns of sporadic attendance.	
Persistently talking negatively about school.	
Overwhelmed by the noise/busyness of the school environment.	
Does not have a person/place where they feel safe in school.	
<b>Family</b>	
Change in family dynamic.	
Parental physical/mental health difficulties	
Overprotective parenting style.	
Experienced a recent loss/bereavement in the family.	
High levels of family stress.	
Family history of EBSA.	
Young carer.	
Witness of domestic abuse/violence.	
Spends most of the day with family member(s) when home.	
When at home in the day, is always entertained.	
<b>Individual</b>	
Appears to have low confidence and self-esteem.	
Seems to be anxious, tearful, or tense.	
Showing feelings of low mood.	
Presents as passive, quiet, or withdrawn.	
Presents as angry and has emotional outbursts.	
Physical changes e.g. eating, sleeping, headaches, stomach aches.	
Presents with social communication difficulties.	
Appears isolated and/or avoids interactions with peers	
Difficulty separating from parent/carer.	
Difficulty in academic skills and/or underlying thinking skills.	
Serious illness or medical condition.	

### School Avoidance Action Plan



#### Predisposing Risk Factors

- 
- 
- 

#### Precipitating Risk Factor

- 
- 
- 

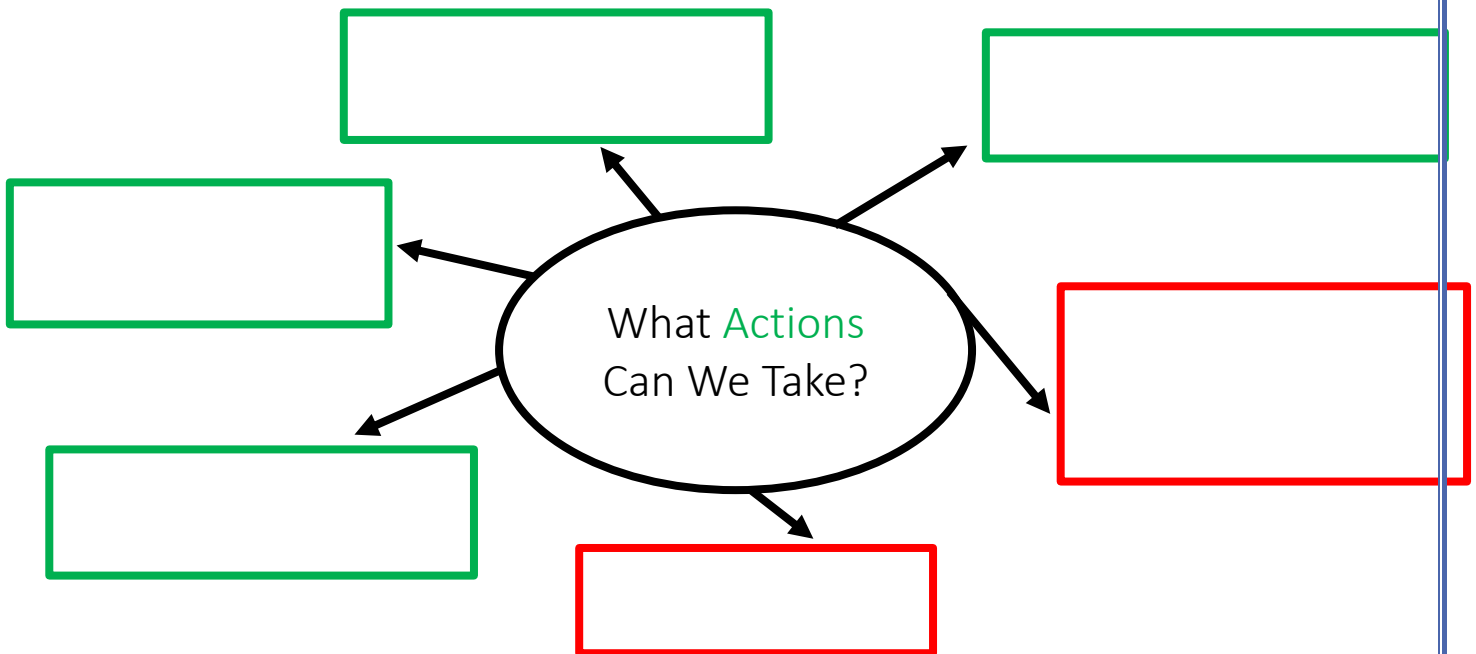
#### Perpetuating Risk Factor

- 
- 
- 

#### Protective Risk Factors

- 
- 
-

In the mind map below, write down some different actions/strategies and decide whether they are *positive* or *negative*.



What action are you going to trial?

What will the school do?

What are you going to do?

Review of action:



### Self-evaluation tool for developing whole school EBSA practices<sup>3</sup>

<b>School culture and ethos</b>	Strength	Development area	Action to take
Senior management team values all students and creates a sense of belonging.			
All staff are valued with clear processes to manage stress/wellbeing.			
CPD for all staff to promote wellbeing as 'everyone's responsibility' – including EBSA.			
Processes embedded to gain student voice within the culture of the school.			
Processes embedded to ensure good communication with parents.			
Processes embedded to ensure good communication with external agencies.			

<b>School systems, policies and practice</b>	Strength	Development area	Action to take
Clear policies on attendance, behaviour, bullying, and equality which is embedded by all staff.			
Curriculum includes teaching of resilience, coping and social skills.			
Curriculum appropriately differences according to need.			
EBSA policy in line with graduated response to outline appropriate interventions for EBSA.			

<b>Prevention of EBSA</b>	Strength	Development area	Action to take
A senior staff responsible for overseeing EBSA policy.			
Good communication between senior leadership, SENCO, EBSA lead etc. regarding EBSA CYP.			
Clear systems in place for early identification of 'at risk' EBSA CYP.			
A member of staff responsibility to undertaking actions as they relate to EBSA e.g. investigating and acting on concerns.			
Teaching staff have some understanding of EBSA to identify early warning signs and know who to raise concerns with.			
A meeting is arranged with parents, YP, and relevant staff to identify the function of school avoidance, the four Ps, and provide tailored intervention.			
Ongoing frequent reviews to tailor and adapt provision with high levels of flexibility from school staff.			

<sup>3</sup> With thanks for West Sussex EP service (2019)

**EBSA school pathway example created by All Saints Benhilton Primary School**

**Tier 1**

Class teachers monitor attendance.

1. First sign of non-attendance:  
Children showing signs of separation anxiety.  
Repeated pattern of non-attendance - e.g. missing every Tuesday.  
Persistent lateness.  
N.B. professional judgement must be used on a case by case basis - such as COVID, hospitalisation, etc.
2. Class teacher to find protective factors that encourage school attendance and build resilience with the child.
3. Class teachers initiate EBSA action plan involving parents within the process and inform in-school professionals.

Research shows that for tier 1, involvement of the class teacher is more impactful and the best remedy to support the child and

**Tier 2**

4. Following implementation and review of the action plan. In-school professionals (e.g. Mental Health Lead/Inclusion Manager) may seek advice from outside agencies on the appropriate course of action - this may include a telephone consultation or email.
5. School will then implement additional resources, provision and strategies to support the child based on recommendations from the outside provider.
6. In-school professionals may refer to external professionals (requiring parental consent) depending on criteria of the service sought e.g rethink it project, EWP, Jigsaw4U and Early Help.

**Tier 3**

7. Despite additional resources, provision and strategies to support the child being implemented EBSA remains at a high level requiring an increasing level of support. Referral to CAMHS or STARS. **Continued liaison with the child, class teacher and family remains a priority.**
8. In circumstances where a child may be dual-registered, return to education should remain a joint goal.

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.

## Additional wellbeing 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

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

## Emotionally Based School Avoidance – Sutton pathway and guidance document

### 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

### Additional contact details for external agencies

Organisation	Concern you may make a referral for	Email and phone number
<a href="#">Off the Record Sutton</a>	Anxiety, low mood – counselling support	<a href="mailto:sutton@talkofftherecord.org">sutton@talkofftherecord.org</a> 0208 680 8899
Early Help	Family functioning or parenting	
<a href="#">Jigsaw4U</a>	Loss and pre/post bereavement support	<a href="mailto:clairepowell@jigsaw4u.org.uk">clairepowell@jigsaw4u.org.uk</a> 0208 687 1384
<a href="#">Sutton Carers Centre</a>	A young person with caring responsibilities	<a href="mailto:enquiries@suttoncarerscentre.org">enquiries@suttoncarerscentre.org</a> 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	<a href="#">YouTube channel</a> <a href="#">Webinar</a> ‘School-based anxiety – Emotionally Related School Avoidance’
<a href="#">SilverCloud</a>	Online therapy programme proven to help with emotional wellbeing.	<a href="#">SilverCloud website</a>
School Nursing	Various concerns related to social, emotional and mental health needs	Parent line: 0208 770 5409 Young person line: 0208 770 4409 <a href="mailto:schoolnursing@sutton.gov.uk">schoolnursing@sutton.gov.uk</a>



## 'Emotionally based school non-attendance: two successful returns to school following lockdown'

Corcoran, Bond, and Knox 2022

A research study in 2022 explored the factors that contributed to two primary aged children successfully returning to school following emotionally based school avoidance. The five key themes are detailed below.

Click the [link](#) to the full journal article.

### Home-school communication

- Daily contact to build rapport with family.
- Consistent use of strategies at home and at school.
- Parental engagement.
- Parents talking positively about school and maintaining a positive association with school.

### Functional approach

- Shared understanding of the function of the child's anxiety.
- Consideration of the push and pull factors for them wanting to stay at home/not go to school.
- This allowed for early environmental changes and tailored intervention.

### Positive relationship

- Child has a positive relationship with school staff, particularly the class teacher.
- All staff have a calm approach and a good understanding of mental health.
- Importance of all staff being on board (head-teacher, lunchtime staff etc).

### Reflective practitioners

- Schools working flexibly and responsively, adaptive practice and expectations to support the child.
- Whist time intensive, opportunities for formal and informal reflection.

### Engagement with professionals

- SENCo initiating referrals for professionals at an early point for preventative involvement, as part of assess, plan do, review cycles.
- Developing clear understanding of unique needs and adapting practice accordingly.

## Working with parents

The role of parents in supporting a return to school is critical. Parents may need to:

- Understand EBSA (see [Cognus guide](#) for parents).
- Understand anxiety and ways in which to support an anxious child.
- Manage family routines (morning/evening).
- Manage boundary setting, rewards, and sanctions.
- Managing the day if their child is not at school.
- Engage in a parenting group for peer support and parenting skills.

Consider a parent information session in the autumn term about school avoidance

Role of school staff to support parental engagement:

- Create a warm and welcoming ethos within the school community.
- Build a positive and supportive relationship with the wider family.
- Provide a key daily contact for the parent.
- Provide non-judgemental support where parents are having difficulty.
- Being available and listen to concerns so the parents feel heard and trusts the school.
- Providing a solution-focused approach to explore what is working well and to maintain a sense of positivity about the situation.
- Signpost services and resources available for the family.

The school and families will need to work together to have:

- Regular two-way communication.
- Visible collaboration between parents and school staff.
- Develop shared understanding of the child (Ps and Fs).
- Joint action planning – small steps and support plan.
- Sending work home and expectations for non-attendance.
- Consistent and predictable – helps everyone.
- Use of scripts and positive messaging.
- Reflective approach involving all adults.
- Planning for transitions and other risk factors.

Click the [link](#) for a resource on engaging with parents/carers to promote wellbeing



Click the [link](#) to DfE best practice case study examples of successful return to education.

## Case studies in Sutton schools

### Case study from Wallington Primary Academy

The SENCo took note of a young person whose attendance was very low. As she was a part of the EBSA training from the Cognus EP service, she was able to employ some of the strategies in efforts of getting the pupil back into school more regularly. She was able to work with the young person to identify some points of anxiety with regards to school. Tools like an adapted scaling and action plan template were used initially and she found them helpful and empowering. There was a heavy emphasis on home visits and maintaining contact with the young person as well as their parents. She found that being persistent in these two areas made a significant difference in getting the young person back into school on a more regular basis. She also noted that a shared responsibility with the parents was highly valuable and necessary in the process. Prior to the Christmas holidays the young person had increased attendance to about 70% of the time.

### Case study from Oaks Park High School

A member of the pastoral team was made aware of a year 7 pupil with around 40% attendance which was the equivalent of one to two days a week. There was further investigation of when the pupil was not in class and which classes were missed. It was noticed that the young person wanted to go unnoticed fading into the background, she maintained a monotone voice, she was quiet, and had little to no eye-contact. This was an indicator to the team to refer to CAMHS as Autism Spectrum Condition was suspected. It was revealed the young person was avoiding because she did not understand the lesson and would rather not attend than deal with the uncertainty. Due to the staff member being attuned and persistence in working with the family and the young person, she is now attending four days a week.

### Case study from Greenshaw High School

A young people was on 47% attendance in Year 9 last year (although this may be an inflated percentage as she was on adapted timetables for large parts of the year or had authorised absences due to EBSA). The school assigned a member of support staff as the EBSA mentor and he offered twice weekly home visits, completed a resilience intervention on a 1:1 basis initially in the home and then in school, daily check-ins on arrival to school, and phone calls home to speak to the young people and her mother to support her in school if she had not come in that day. The young person's attendance is now 97% this academic year.