

PARENT/CARER GUIDE FOR EMOTIONALLY BASED SCHOOL AVOIDANCE (EBSA)

WHAT IS EBSA?

School attendance is highly important for longer-term outcomes for young people, however in some cases pupils find attending school challenging. Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) is a term used to describe pupils who experience severe difficulties in attending school due to emotional factors, often resulting in prolonged absences from school. This is different from truancy, which refers to non-attendance at school without parent/carer knowledge. Young people of all ages and in all forms of educational settings can experience EBSA. Whilst some children stop attending school overnight, for most, the pattern of non-attendance and avoidance occurs gradually, over time. At the first sign of avoidance of school, it is important that you contact the school to meet and agree together a plan of reintegration and support.

Research has found there is usually one of four main functions to school avoidance (Kearney and Silverman, 1990). Parents/carers and their child can complete a questionnaire about their experiences to explore which of these main themes may be contributing to their avoidance. Support for your child to re-engage in learning will depend on the underlying reason they are avoiding school.



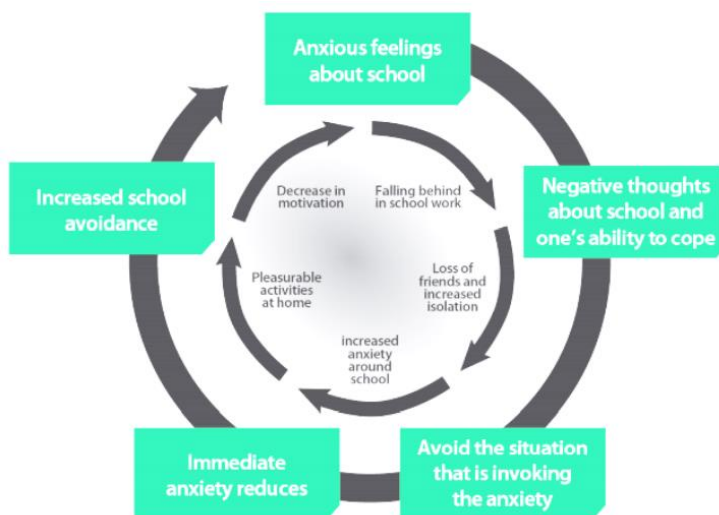
POTENTIAL TRIGGERS

All children have differences in their family circumstances, experiences of school, and their own attributes which can protect them, or place them at increased risk of experiencing EBSA. It is therefore helpful to be aware of the potential triggers that may be leading to the difficulties your child is experiencing so that support can be put in place for them.

Consider which of the following triggers may relate to your child:

- **Factors within school** such as academic pressures (e.g. learning/exams), social pressures (e.g. bullying), or the structure of school (e.g. transitions, particular lessons, or break/lunch times).
- **Factors relating to their family** such as changes in family circumstances (e.g. separation/divorce/bereavement/ young carer), parenting styles (e.g. being overprotective), family stress or family history of EBSA.
- **Factors relating to themselves** such as low confidence/self-esteem, physical illness, unsupported difficulties (e.g. Autism), or anxiety. There are also particular ages that show increased risk such as 5-6 years, 11-12 years, and 13-14 years.

ANXIETY AND AVOIDANCE



Whilst a small amount of anxiety can be helpful (e.g. for enhancing performance before an important event), sometimes anxiety can feel scary, especially when it feels overwhelming and stops us doing things we would usually do.

One of the most common ways of managing anxiety is to avoid a situation which feels scary as this offers immediate relief. However, this is a short-term solution which increases anxiety and makes it even more difficult to face the situation next time – see diagram.

Parents may often spot the warning signs of anxiety first, and therefore responding early to any worries or unhappiness about school is important.

WHAT CAN YOU EXPECT SCHOOL TO DO TO SUPPORT YOUR CHILD?

Action planning is an important part of getting your child back into school quickly and needs to be part of a joined-up approach with school, parents, your child, and any professionals involved. You should be able to expect the following:

Commitment

Staff developing a shared understanding of the pupil's needs and committing to joint action plans with small achievable targets, personalised to the reasons your child is feeling anxious. External professionals may be sought to support.

Communication

Visible and regular home and school communication, reviewing strategies and problem-solving challenges. Positive relationships are very important so make every effort to engage with school and try to reach agreements.

Consistency

Ensuring that everyone is working towards the same aims and agreed actions, demonstrating consistency in approaches across the school and for the pupil to see. The provision of ongoing support for you and your child.

WHAT CAN YOU DO AT HOME TO SUPPORT YOUR CHILD?

Once you have identified possible indicators that your child is experiencing anxiety, together with the school, an action plan based on the main function of avoidance identified is required. The following provides tailored strategies based on the function of avoidance.

Function 1: Avoiding uncomfortable feelings brought on by attending school.

- Reassure your child that anxiety is a natural, normal feeling that everyone experiences. Read books together such as *'What to Do When You Worry Too Much'* by Dawn Huebner.
- Irrespective of your own thoughts and feelings about school, ensure your child receives positive messages that school is safe and supportive. Managing your anxiety effectively is key to supporting your child.
- Speak with your child to identify particular situations or events in school which seem to underpin their anxiety.
- Develop an action plan with your child and school with small steps for gradual exposure. Tell your child they are brave and you are proud of them for every small step they achieve.

Function 2: Avoiding situations such as social pressures and academic demands.

- Normalise anxiety in relation to high-stakes situations and help your child realise anxiety can be reduced.
- Talk 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.
- Discuss your child's concerns, and if they are demonstrating 'what if' thinking e.g. 'what if everyone laughs at me', follow up with gentle questions to help them reframe their thinking such as 'what's the chance that will happen?'
- Liaise with school to ensure changes are made to support the stressful situation e.g. differentiation in their learning, adjustments to exam situations, or a social club.

Function 3: avoiding school due to separation anxiety.

- Provide time for your child to learn about anxiety and how this affects them.
- Provide highly structured and consistent morning and evening routines even if they are not currently in school. They should be waking up at least 90 minutes before school starts, getting dressed and undertaking learning tasks during the day.
- Establish positive and individual time to spend with your child outside school hours and limit the attention they receive when they do not attend school. Ensure they are not spending time having 'fun' when at home.
- Read *'The Invisible String'* by Patrice Karst.
- Establish rewards for attending school and appropriate consequences if they do not.
- Be aware of parental behaviours that unintentionally reinforce school avoidance. For example, jumping in too quickly to 'rescue' and allowing them to stay at home.

Function 4: Avoiding school to pursue reward outside of school.

- Increasing rewards for attendance and disincentives for nonattendance. This can be negotiated using a 'contract' for everyone to agree.
- Try to be calm, supportive, and consistent when communicating with your child about school, acknowledging their concerns and referring to the contract.
- During school time, when your child is at home, ensure that 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.
- It may be necessary to escort your child to and from school.



WHERE CAN YOU GO FOR ADDITIONAL SUPPORT?

Organisation	Details	Contact information
Child's school	This should be your first point of contact	Check the individual school's website and contact attendance team or SENCo.
Cognus Educational Psychology Service	You can request a call back from an Educational Psychologist to problem solve key concerns and receive advice over the phone	Click link - Educational Psychology Service - Phone Consultations for Parents & School Staff.
Sutton Education Wellbeing Service (in some schools)	A mental health support team offering pupil, parent and staff support	Support details provided by the Mental Health Lead in school.
Sutton Information, Advice and Support Services (SIASS)	Impartial, confidential advice about education, health, and social care for CYP and parents/carers.	sutton@siass.co.uk 0208 323 0462
Off the Record Sutton	Anxiety, low mood – counselling support	sutton@talkofftherecord.org 0208 680 8899
Kooth	Free online mental wellbeing community for CYP	http://www.kooth.com/
CYP's Wellbeing Team Service YouTube Channel	Recorded workshops, webinars, and short videos on various wellbeing topics, for parents/ young people and school staff	Webinar 'School-based anxiety – Emotionally Related School Avoidance'
School Nursing	Various concerns related to social, emotional, and mental health needs.	Parent line: 0208 770 5409 CYP line: 0208 770 4409 schoolnursing@sutton.gov.uk