Cognus
No Limits on Learning
Educational Psychology Service

© Cognus Limited 2025

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.



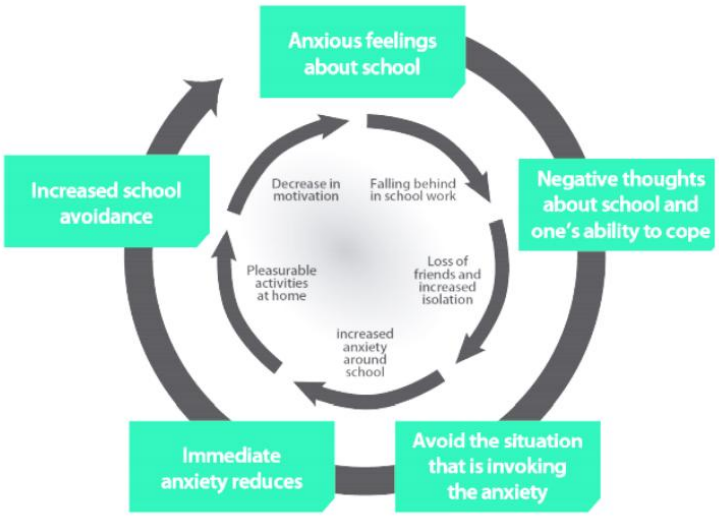
POTENTIAL TRIGGERS

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 your child's needs and committing to joint action plans with achievable targets, personalised to your child. 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 your child 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.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ROUTINES AROUND SCHOOL

Routines will look different for every family but creating a routine with your child around school can help everyone. It is important for everyone to be involved to help understand different points of views and perspectives.

To start, try to set a time where you and your child can work together to outline how a routine will look, allow them input on how and when, not if it will happen. Start the conversation by asking your child about their thoughts. If they don't think that anything needs to change then it can be helpful for you to explain why routines are important and invite their suggestions of how it could be better for them. Help your child to prepare for school the night before so there is not an added rush or opportunity for delays in the morning.

The following steps can be helpful to follow to build a successful routine:



Sleep

Sleep patterns are particularly important, and it must be closely monitored if your child is trying to catch up on sleep during the day. Poor sleep patterns disrupt routines and feed anxiety making it much harder to break a cycle of avoidance. Good sleep hygiene includes not having caffeine 4-6 hours before bed, creating a comfortable sleep environment and having regular sleep times are key to a good routine.

Examples of routines:

The evening before school

- Prepare uniform, equipment and lunch for the next day.
- Agree a plan for the morning and discuss any worries before bedtime.
- Encourage calming activities before bed, such as reading, listening to music or spending time with family.
- Aim for a consistent time to sleep.

The morning before school

- Aim to wake up at a consistent time.
- Follow the agreed routine as consistently as possible.
- Break tasks down into manageable steps (e.g. get dressed, have breakfast, brush teeth, leave for school).
- Use prompts, visual timetables or routine cards if these are helpful.
- Allow extra time where possible to reduce pressure and stress.

CALM PARENT - CALM CHILD

Children look to their parents/carers to see how they respond to situations and are very good at reading their cues. If you look anxious, your child will interpret this as a sign that they should be worried (or confirm their worried feelings), and it may make them feel that the situation is not safe.

When your child is feeling overwhelmed

One of the most important ways you can support your child is to calmly listen to them and acknowledge that their fears are real to them. Remind them how important it is to attend school and reassure them that you and the school will work with them to make school a happier place for them. It can be very hard to remain calm and upbeat when you see your child is anxious and upset. You may find it helpful to share how you are feeling with someone you trust so that you can get support for yourself in managing your emotions.

✅ **Do**	❌ **Don't**
Listen and talk to your child.	Interrupt, dismiss or minimise their feelings.
Emphasise and acknowledge how hard it is.	Say things like "There's nothing to worry about" or "Just get over it."
Stay calm and model confidence that support is available.	Give them more attention for being anxious than being brave.
Support your child to face and confront their fears (where possible).	Argue about whether their anxiety is justified.
Encourage small, achievable next steps towards school.	Avoid school discussions altogether or remove all expectations.
Praise effort, bravery and positive steps, however small.	Reinforce your child's fears.
Work with your child and school to follow an agreed plan.	Make promises that your child can stay off school indefinitely.
Show your child you believe they can do this.	Try to 'jolly' them out of the emotion.

Remember: **Validate the feeling, not the avoidance**.

"I can hear that you're feeling really worried about going back into school on Monday. I'm sorry. That must be really tough."

I can see you're feeling really anxious about school today, and we'll support you through it. Let's think about the next step together."

One of the largest factors in de-escalation is parents'/carers' emotional regulation and staying inside the window of tolerance

- Reasoning or problem-solving during a meltdown is unlikely to be effective. Your child needs time and space to regulate first.
- Once the fight, flight or freeze response is activated, your child is perceiving a threat. Anything that feels threatening may escalate the situation further.
- Avoid shouting, as this can increase distress and reduce the likelihood of de-escalation.
- If your child is shouting, wait until they are calmer before responding in a calm and empathetic manner.
- Validate feelings, but not unhelpful behaviours. Emotions are acceptable; it is the actions that may need support and guidance.
- Be mindful of your body language and facial expressions. Try to remain neutral and avoid appearing angry or frustrated.
- Avoid standing over your child. Where possible, sit at their level or give them space.

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