Emotional Barriers to School Attendance

Guidance document for schools and professionals in Sutton

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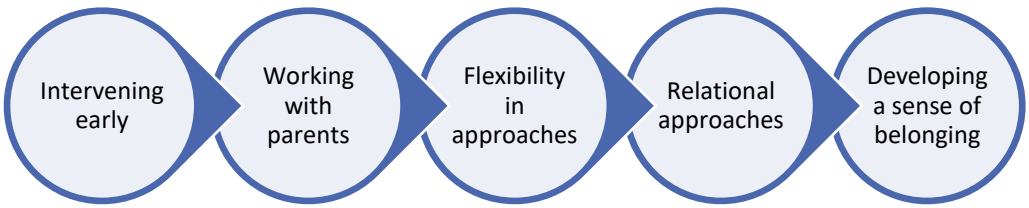
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Introduction

Guidance development

This guidance is aimed at professionals to provide advice and guidance from a psychological perspective to support engagement in learning for young people experiencing EBSA. This guidance 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 was updated by Cognus Educational Psychology Service in Spring 2023, in Autumn 2024 and now again in Autumn 2026 to continually reflect recent research and context of the local area.

This most recent guidance is based on the evidence base of factors which are associated with positive outcomes for CYP experiencing EBSA which include:



National context

In May 2022, the Department for Education (DfE) published guidance on '*working together to improve school attendance*'. This document emphasises creating a calm, orderly, safe, and supportive environment where all pupils want to be and are keen and ready to learn.

School attendance has become a national priority in recent years with rates remaining below pre-pandemic levels - the DfE published attendance figures for 2025/26 stating that persistent absence was 19.05% rising from 10.9% pre-covid. These challenges have led to a surge in attendance related research, including a growing body of doctoral theses by trainee Educational Psychologists. This research has highlighted there are an array of contributing factors leading to EBSA such as attendance pressures, unmet learning needs, challenging transitions, neurodiversity, and socioeconomic disadvantage.

The literature has also highlighted the range of challenges associated with non-attendance in school. This includes educational outcomes at GCSE as well as an increased risk of engaging in criminal activity, difficulties in overall wellbeing, and reduced career opportunities. There is also new research published which considers how the needs of some learners with entrenched school non-attendance and high anxiety may present a different profile of needs and therefore require a different pathway of support.

Local area context

Sutton's attendance strategy seeks to address the needs of children in Sutton by removing barriers they face achieving good school attendance. Comparing persistent absence rates in the last seven years, the 2018/19 academic year persistent absence rate was 9.2%, which increased to 21% in the year 2021/2022 and has reduced to 15.25% in the year 2025/26. This is in line with national patterns where persistent absence has reduced in the last two years but remains higher than pre-covid rates. Positively, Sutton persistent absence is currently lower than national averages.

To support attendance locally, the strategy has set five priorities: improving mental health and wellbeing, family support, multi-agency support, removing barriers, and legal intervention.

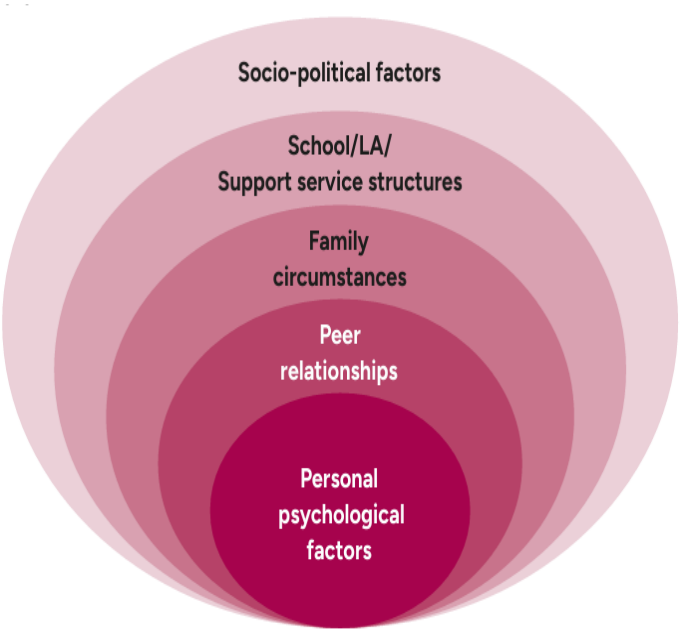
Sutton's attendance graduated response provides a multi-agency framework that support working together to encourage school attendance and tackle the barriers to attendance that may arise for a child or young person. Please see the Cognus website for information about the role of the Cognus attendance team in promoting attendance. For the most severe cases of non-attendance, Sutton schools can also refer to the Complex Attendance Panel for advice and guidance. The current guidance needs to be read alongside Sutton's attendance strategy and graduated response.

Psychological underpinnings of Emotional Barriers to School Attendance (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 within this topic is hotly debated and there have been changes in what is accepted as we learn more about CYP' experiences. Historically, school refusal was an accepted term although this is now rarely used as it implies that the CYP has full control over their non-attendance. It is also important to make the clear distinction between those that are absent from school due to truanting and those that are absent from school due to the specific emotional distress they experience around attending school. Terms such as barriers to education, emotionally related school attendance (ERSA), anxiety-based school avoidance (ABSA), emotional barriers to school attendance (EBSA), or similar variations are relevant and acceptable terms. It is important to note that EBSA is not a medical diagnosis.

Recent research has highlighted that the prevalence rates of EBSA have increased due to the wider environmental factors in society such as cost of living, impact of covid-19, narrowing of the curriculum, and limited availability of mental health services (to name a few).



Therefore, it is important that EBSA is not just seen as a within-child problem where the CYP has irrational anxiety about school, but that there are often wider systemic factors involved. Therefore, it is important that the impact of these factors is considered when unpicking the challenges for CYP and also when developing action plans to support engagement in learning.

Risk factors

When exploring the array of factors contributing to EBSA at multi-levels, it is important to consider the risks. 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 combined with a significant change in circumstance that exacerbate the problem. The following table provides an overview of potential risk factors for CYP.

Factors within school	Factors related to the family context	Individual factors within a child
• Bullying • Difficulties in specific subject • Transition to secondary school, key stage or change of school • Structure of school day • Academic demands/high levels of pressure and performance-orientated classrooms • Journey to school • Exams • Peer or staff difficulties • Entrance into school/transition points during the school day	• 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 • Financial difficulties • Insecure housing	• Temperamental style-withdrawal from unfamiliar settings/ people • Fear of failure and poor self confidence • Physical illness • Age (5-6, 11-12, 13-14) • Learning difficulties, or Autism if unidentified or unsupported • Separation anxiety from parent • Traumatic events

<u>Key themes from literature:</u>

- School is too much pressure: YP report that school is a key factor contributing to poor mental health (Popoola & Sivers, 2023).
- Relationship difficulties, both with adults and/or peers, are a key factor (Corcoran & Kelly, 2022; Popoola & Sivers, 2023).
- Year 7 appears to be a particular trigger for reduced attendance, but there is also evidence for a second 'transition' point at year 8. The impact of transitions on attendance is exacerbated for those with SEND (ImpactEd, 2024).
- Risk factors for non-attendance are intersectional. For example, female pupils eligible for free school meals who also have SEND are particularly at risk (ImpactEd, 2024, Bond et al., 2024).
- Persistent non-attenders also relate non-attendance to difficulties with learning, and experiences of not having their learning needs understood or consistently met (Corcoran & Kelly, 2022)
- Evidence indicates that school absence occurs disproportionately in areas of socioeconomic deprivation (Bond et al., 2024).

Protective factors

Protective factors can be described as the positive factors that are 'pushing' the CYP towards attending school. It important to identify these to utilise strengths and successes when action planning.

Protective factors could include:

- ✓ Motivation for engaging in learning and aspirations for future career.
- ✓ Positive experiences where they can succeed e.g. enjoyment in a particular hobby/ subject, and confidence in their own abilities in an aspect of their life and or academic capabilities.
- ✓ Positive relationships with some staff to create a sense of belongingness.
- ✓ Understanding the relationship between their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours.
- ✓ Willingness for the CYP, school, family, and professionals to work together.
- ✓ Parental engagement and developing parenting skills.
- ✓ Flexibility of approach in school and person-centred thinking about the problem.
- ✓ Peer relationships that a young person has sustained in school.



Resilience

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. Resiliency factors can involve individual factors within the CYP, and protective factors within their immediate environment and relationships.

A risk and resiliency proforma can be helpful to unpick the individual context of the CYP's risk and resiliency profile, and ways in which some of the factors can be changed to tip the balance towards more positive outcomes.



Click the link to complete the home-school risk and resiliency proforma

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 two diagrams below.

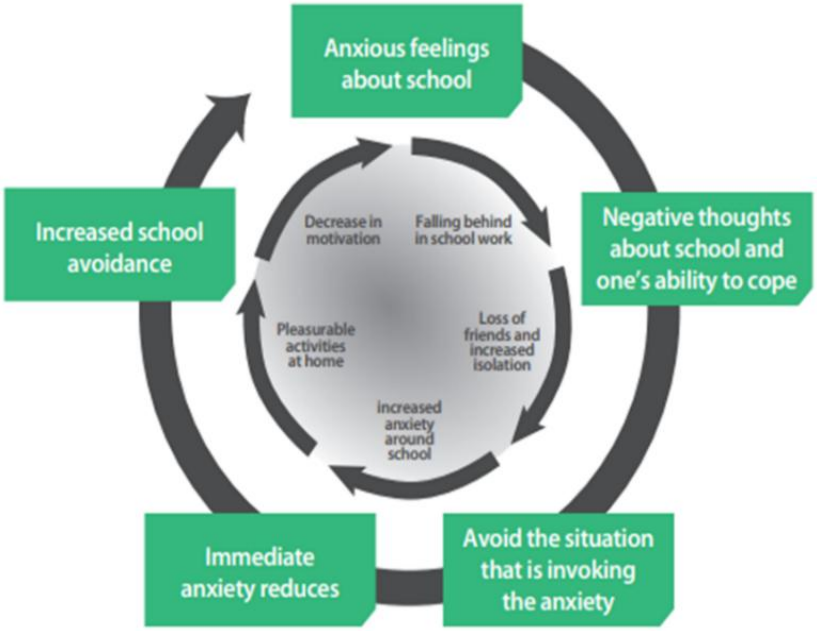


Figure 1: Cycle of anxiety and avoidance

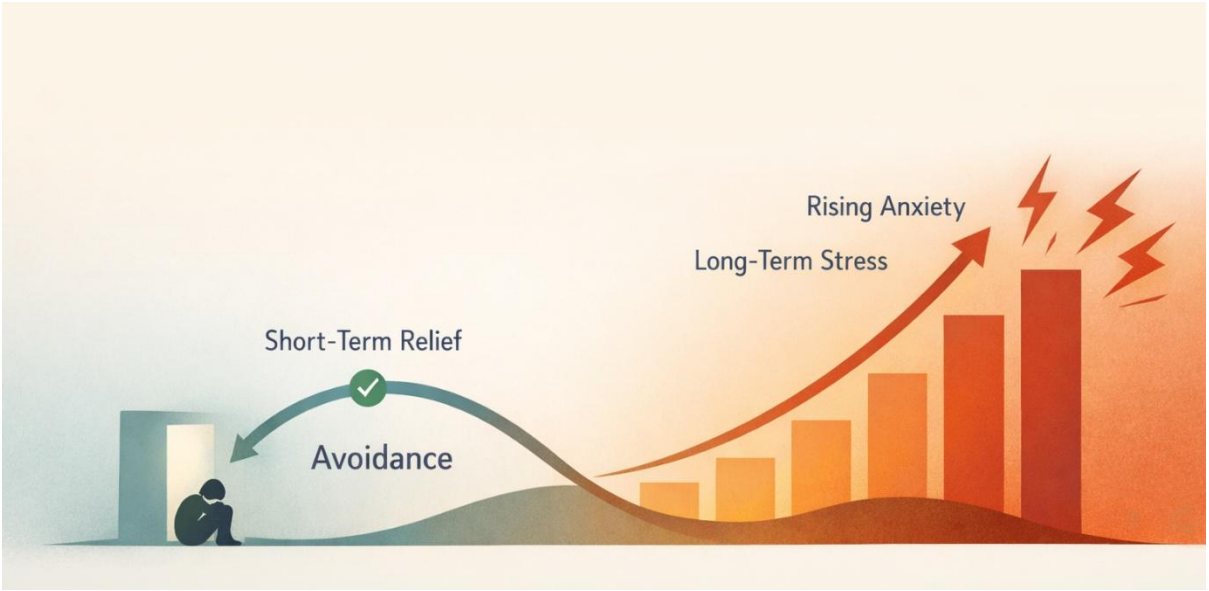
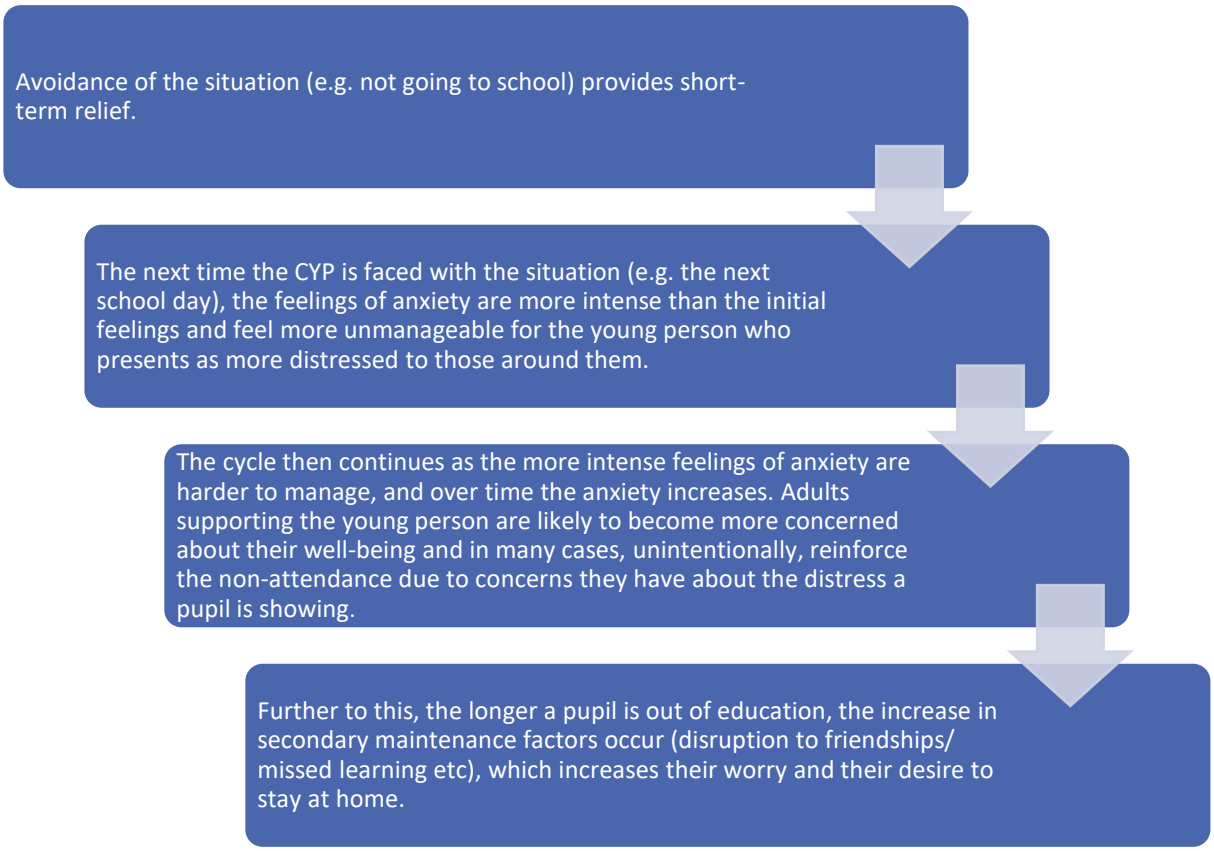


Figure 2: Anxiety and avoidance

When a CYP experiences anxiety or uncomfortableness as a result of a school situation, the following often occurs:



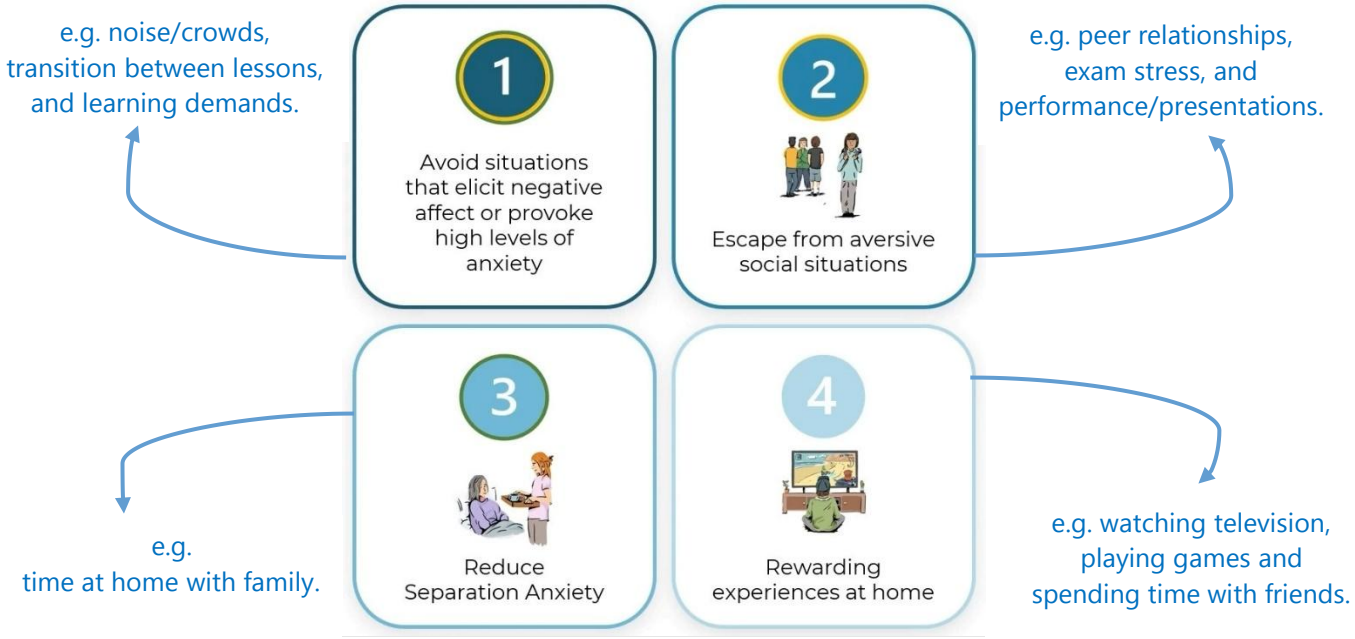
Based on the avoidance cycle above, it is important to adopt a preventative approach and respond in a timely manner when the CYP first shows signs of avoidance as the CYP is more likely to remember the success of attending, experience a reduction of anxiety and therefore attendance is more likely promoted. It is important that this message is shared with all adults working with the CYP at school and at home.

In some cases, a young person will seem to skip some of the earlier stages of this model and withdraw from school almost immediately as they enter a period of 'emotional burnout' and/or shutdown. This does not happen often but is anecdotally seen more commonly in Autistic young people. It is important that this explanation of a pupil's presentation is not made by school staff or parents but instead following the assessment of a psychology professional.

Functions of school avoidance

It is clear there is not one single cause of EBSA, and usually there are multiple contributing factors which are often complex and involve factors at school, within the family, and the individual context of the CYP. In order to support re-engagement in learning, it is important to understand the unique context of the CYP so that targeted intervention can be put in place.

In a review of the literature surrounding school avoidance, Kearney and Silverman (1990) defined four main themes that cause school avoidance behaviours for CYP. Whilst this is an older model, its theoretical underpinnings remain relevant. 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 to support action planning.

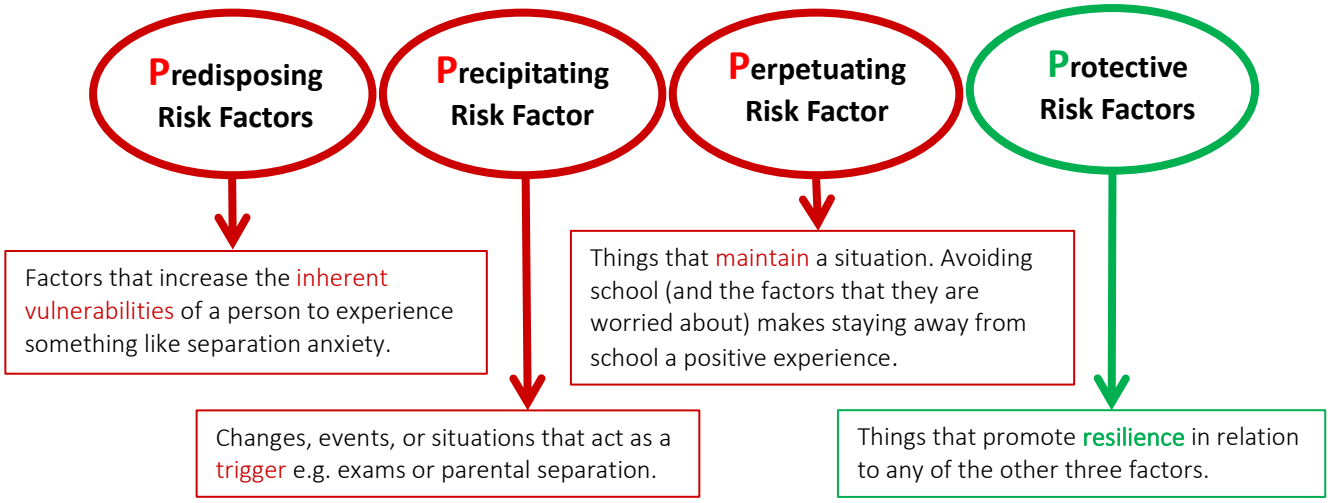


In further work by the authors, they make the distinction between the first two factors which are school-based factors negatively reinforcing the avoidance (e.g. pulling the child away from school), and the final two in which factors outside of school/at home are **positively reinforcing** the avoidance (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 – see intervention plans based on priority formulation. The school avoidance scale is a helpful questionnaire to complete with the CYP and their parents to unpick the most relevant function.

Click the links to complete the school avoidance scale questionnaire for YP and one for parents to explore the priority function of their avoidance.

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 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
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?
Perpetuating factors ➔ *REDUCE THESE*	• 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?
Protective factors ➔ *INCREASE AND BUILD UPON THESE*	• What do you feel are your child's strengths? • What has helped in previous situations which they have found difficult? • 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?

Click the link to the gaining parent views information gathering proforma template

Neurodiversity and EBSA

There has been an increase in research evidence of the experiences of CYP with social communication difficulties or a diagnosis of Autism who are experiencing difficulties with attending school due to heightened anxiety. Research highlights absence due to EBSA is noticeably higher amongst autistic pupils (Anderson, 2020). In fact over 30% of autistic pupils in England are identified as 'persistent absentees' (DfE 2022, NAS 2023). Interestingly, autistic girls are more likely to experience EBSA than boys (Moyse, 2021; O'Hagan, et al., 2022).

Lived experiences

The 'Difference Matters' report (August 2024) by the 'Resources for Autism' charity summarised insights from 78 neurodivergent CYP aged 11 to 23 and their parents about their experiences of mainstream secondary school across 13 London boroughs. Results found:

- 56% of CYP have 2 days or less a week that are good days at school.
- 57% of CYP reported they missed most (34%) or a few days (23%) at school.
- 51% of CYP said that they did not feel safe at school for some of the time, rarely or never.
- 28% reported some form of exclusion (internal, external, and permanent).
- 49% of the survey respondents reported that they didn't have any friends at school.
- 47% reported not having a quiet or sensory space available at school for them to use.
- 60% find lunchtimes, transitioning between lessons, break times, the start and end of the school day overwhelming.

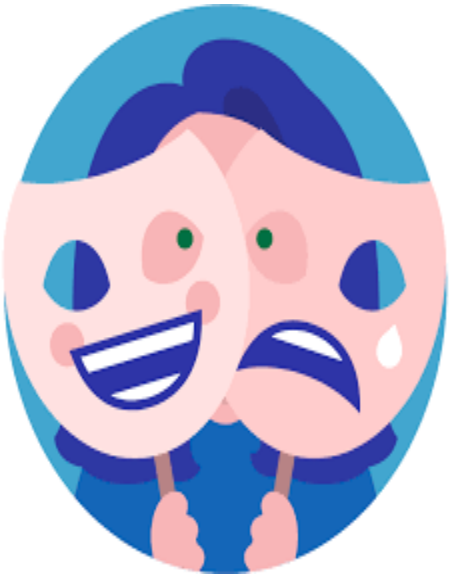
These increased risks seem to be explained by the emotional challenges autistic young people experience which are directly related to stressors within the school environment (Hamilton, 2024). A study found that fewer than half of autistic pupils in the UK report being happy in school, with many identifying an improved understanding of autism within the school community as the factor that would make the most difference (APPGA, 2017).

Inherent challenges for autistic students include:

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

Example triggers include:

- Anxiety relating to elements of the school environment e.g. toilets, corridor, canteen, and changing rooms.
- Escape from aversive social situations e.g. negative relationships with peers or teachers including bullying.
- The uncertainty and unpredictability that is part of secondary school life.
- The stress of peers not sticking to rules.
- 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.



Social camouflaging and masking: These cumulative negative social experiences contribute to the tendency to mask or socially camouflage autistic traits in some young people. Masking is saying you're ok when you're not, to avoid attention and blend in. Camouflaging is acting like other people to fit in. This is typically more common in females and those with average – above average intelligence. Students may therefore present as managing in school, whilst they are in fact experiencing significant levels of emotional distress which culminates in an inability to attend school. This can lead to burnout, exhaustion, reduced sense of identity and poorer mental health (Bernadin et al, 2021; Chapman et al, 2022). It is therefore important to gain an understanding of how the CYP presents at home to explore the extent of possible masking and camouflaging.

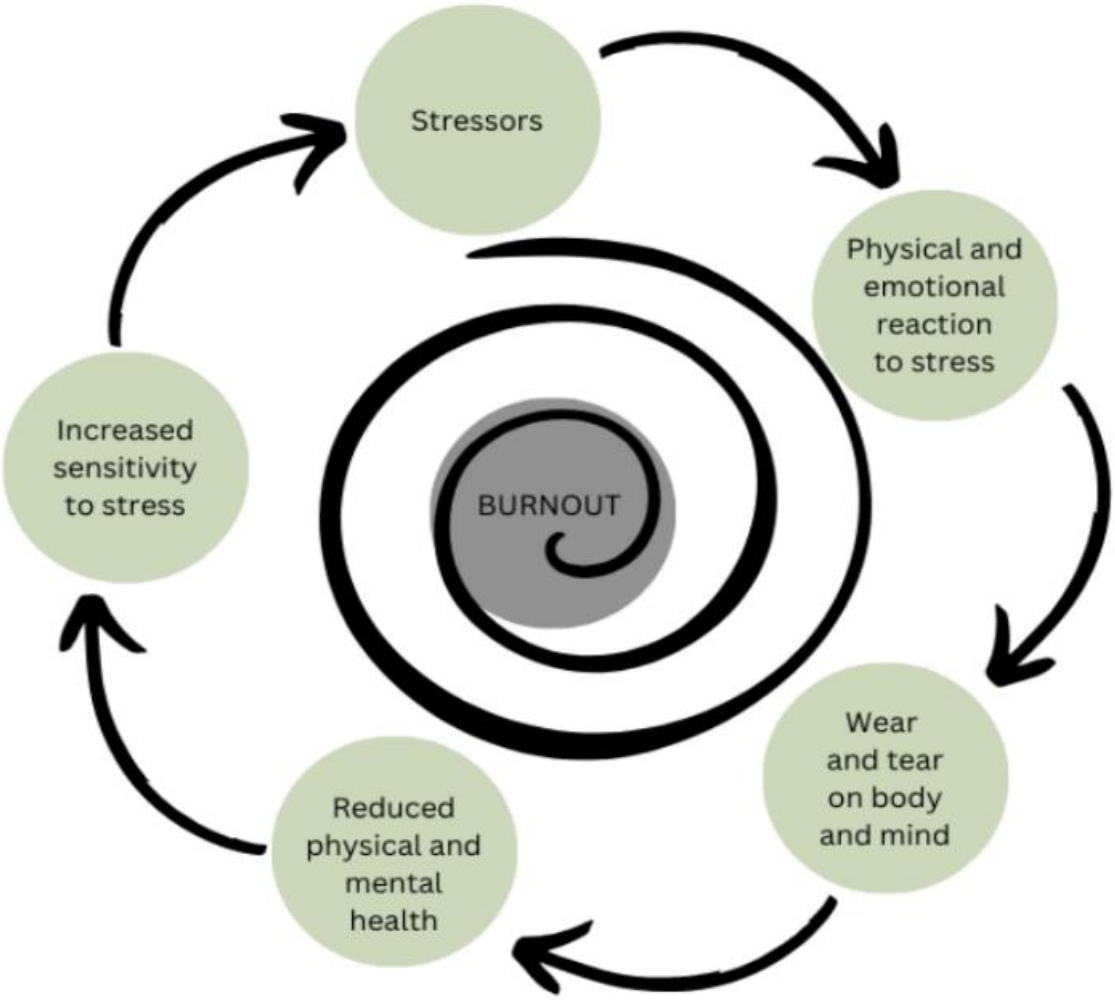
School belonging: Research suggests that school connectedness is more difficult to achieve for autistic students than their neurotypical peers and they are more likely to experience loneliness and isolation in school (Locke, 2010). In order to fit in, they are more likely to minimise their differences and adapt their behaviour in accordance with neuro-normative expectations – leading to masking and burnout. Research has indicated that developing authentic belonging for autistic pupils could reduce the imperative they feel to mask their differences and in turn potentially reduce the likelihood of EBSA as the pupil would be experiencing lower levels of anxiety.



Burn-out: Burn-out is a state of complete mental, physical, and emotional exhaustion due to chronic life stress. For a minority of CYP, pressures within school, home, and themselves may exceed their ability to cope. Research into this in relation to school attendance is only just starting to emerge, and this term must be used with caution when describing behaviour a young person is presenting with, and only after suggestion of a qualified professional.

A CYP may say there are feeling 'ok' when experiencing heightened stress and anxiety because:

- They don't want to attract attention.
- Everyone else seems to be coping so they feel that they should be too.
- They have an overriding need to want to fit in.
- They don't want to get told off.
- They don't want to answer difficult questions and feel it's easier to say everything is 'ok'.



In very few instances, the CYP may be experiencing a trauma response when thinking, talking about, or attending school. Therefore, the way in which the CYP is supported, needs to be considered in a trauma-informed and relational approach.

Therefore, adults must look for early signs that a CYP may be experiencing high levels of emotional stress and potential burn-out. This could include increased sensory sensitivity, physical exhaustion, reduced self-care, emotional reactivity, meltdowns, reduced executive functioning, increased withdrawal/isolation, and consequently becoming unable to attend school. It is important that this explanation of a pupil's presentation is not made by school staff or parents but instead following the assessment of a psychology professional.

How can we increasingly support neurodiverse CYP in school?

All staff to have knowledge of the lived experiences of neurodiverse CYP and ways in which to make the classroom autism-friendly.	All staff to be aware of signs of camouflaging and masking and the impact for CYP.	Provide small group social opportunities for neurodiverse pupils e.g. visuals and preparation (e.g. scripts and role-play examples).
Celebrate neurodiversity by sharing the strengths of neurodiverse pupils – this should be a whole school approach (e.g. displays, assemblies and class texts).	Ensure neurodivergent CYP have a space on student councils and forums to share their voice too.	Encourage attendance at an after-school club linked to their interests.
Teach peers about neurodiversity and support them to support the CYP – circle of friends is a helpful approach.	Provide a time for the CYP to understand their strengths and challenges as it relates to their diagnosis and explore alternative healthy coping strategies.	Close communicaton with the family regarding their experiences both at home and in school.
Planned down-time in the day to regulate anxiey levels e.g. sensory activities.	Make the day as predictable as structured as possible, using visuals and giving clear warnings prior to change.	Seek CYPs' experiences to explore what is going well and what they are finding most difficult. Make adaptations based on their views.
Provide social hubs and safe spaces for neurodivergent CYP to regulate and prepare for the next part of the day.	Review policies to ensure these are neuroinclusive and adaptations can be accommodated.	Work with CYP to create pupil passports that help sttaff understand their strengths and needs.

Next steps:

- ✓ Sign up to fully funded training from the Cognus Autism and Social Communication Team.
- ✓ Read the advice and guidance from Cognus Autism and Social Communication team. Support families to sign up to the Cognus Autism Team parent workshops.
- ✓ Use the recommended resources from the EBSA guidance to elicit CYPs' voices to learn about their lived experiences within your school context.
- ✓ Ensure the school has an autism champion.
- ✓ Speak to your attached EP regarding embedding some of the above recommendations.
- ✓ Develop a mechanism to monitor neurodiverse pupils' wellbeing and attendance.
- ✓ The following website may be helpful to provide further information.

Transition

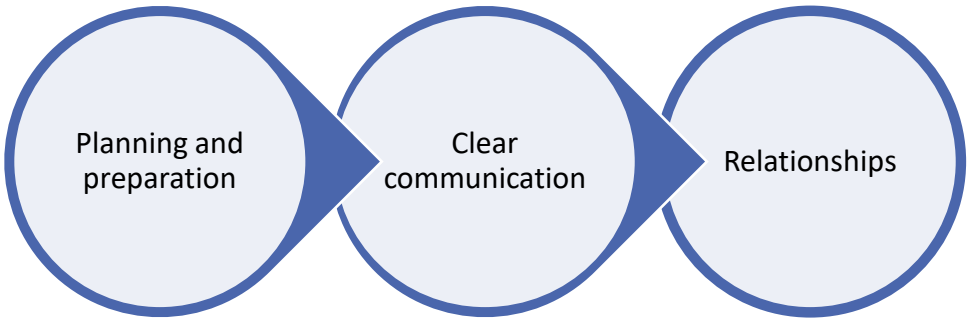
Although change is a normal part of life, transitions are times when feelings of uncertainty are often experienced because it involves moving from a state of 'known', to being faced with a lot of unknowns. Therefore, even positive transitions; changes that we look forward to, can still feel overwhelming. 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.

Over the last few years there has been an increase in the number of pupils in Sutton who experience difficulties moving from primary school to secondary school resulting in an increasing number who go on to display significant difficulties with attending school.

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



Important considerations for monitoring 'at risk' EBSA students during transition

- Revise and refer to a school attendance policy which details proactive steps to good attendance and is 'analytical' in identifying factors which are preventing attendance.
- Primary and secondary settings to identify previous school avoidance and attendance concerns and ensure this forms a part of all transition planning.
- All staff to be trained in noticing the early signs of EBSA and key relational strategies to implement to ensure pupils feel safe and supported in school.
- Close monitoring of attendance and timely support if concerns arise.



Primary school strategies for supporting Year 6 to 7 transfer

Individual schools will have their own approaches to support transitions and the following are recommendations that schools may wish to consider.

Planning and preparation	- Identification of those who will struggle most with the transition and consideration of why this may be. - Creating a personalised transition plan for each pupil identified in collaboration with parents. - Early preparation of annual review in Year 5/6 for CYP with an EHCP – this should include consideration of any new information required including professional assessment and inviting secondary school SENCo in the summer term of Year 6. - The primary school developing a school readiness plan from the beginning of Year 5 for at risk and vulnerable students focusing on developing their confidence and independence in managing the demands of secondary school. - Pupils to walk into school without parents during Year 6 and travel training and practising the journey to and from school with increasing independence. - PSHE focus on developing resilience, anxiety management skills, emotional regulation and independence in learning. - Teaching organisation skills such as reading a timetable, packing your bag and homework planners so that pupils can undertake these tasks independently before secondary. - If possible, start using different rooms or working with different teachers during Year 6 to prepare pupils for the altered structures of secondary. - For schools linked to a Mental Health Support Team the Sutton Education Wellbeing Service offer 'worry ninja' sessions to all Year 6's. - Transition groups run by ELSAs who can seek supervision from their Educational Psychologist supervisor. - Helping pupils to understand both the differences and similarities between primary and secondary school. Visiting settings, looking at websites and creating visual guides with pupils can support this.
Clear communication	- Communicate with secondary school regarding at risk pupils and ways in which to support their wellbeing and attendance – all provision mapping should be transferred. - Year 6 teacher to speak with secondary SENCO/form tutor. Consider sharing a piece of free writing at this time to demonstrate the functional skill level a pupil has. - Produce a 'Pupil Passport' or 'One Page Profile' to pass on which includes pupil and parent voice. All appropriate staff at the secondary school should have access to this, e.g. a lunchtime supervisor would need to know about behaviour concerns. - Ensure that communication is timely, and parents receive information early, in an accessible format and which they have the opportunity to ask questions about.

Secondary school strategies to support the Year 6 to 7 transfer

Individual schools will have their own approaches to support transitions and the following are recommendations that schools may wish to consider.

Planning and preparation	- The identification of a transition lead within the school who works closely with the SENCO and Head of Year (if not either member of staff). - Transition days and events for SEND pupils and, if necessary, out of hours options for pupils who would benefit from seeing the school at a quieter time. - Secondary school summer school/holiday activities, especially for students who need extra transition support. - Clarify any adaptations to the school's behaviour policy to support good transition and recognise that arrangements for Year 7's may differ to those higher up in the school. For example, a more flexible approach to behaviour management for 'low-level' concerns at the start of Year 7 e.g., sanctions related to organisation, homework, lateness etc. before adherence to the whole-school system is applied. - Creation of virtual tours/films to show a 'walk around' of key locations, outline break and lunchtimes and explain the key differences between primary and secondary school. A section which is from the perspective of a student with additional needs can be very helpful. - Being mindful of the movement in between classes during Year 7 and preparing students for these changes. For some pupils, consideration of a 'base' classroom arrangement where several subjects are taught to a group of students. - Separate break and lunchtimes for Year 7's (or distinct playground areas) to make these periods of the days easier and a Year 7 buddy system in place. - Smaller 'transition' sets for pupils with high levels of SEND to support their transition to the secondary curriculum. - A gradual introduction of homework and support for subject teachers in differentiating homework. - A PSHE curriculum which builds on the anxiety management approaches taught during Year 6 and focuses on developing peer relationships and a sense of belonging amongst the pupils. See also resources from Anna Freud: Moving up: the transition to secondary school | Anna Freud. - Lunch and break time clubs for pupils who are struggling to make friends. - Classroom observations across different subjects by the SENCO to ensure the implementation of strategies and provision and to support subject teachers if necessary. - Teaching of positive behaviours before sanctioning of negative ones. - Recognition that some pupils don't want to stand out with support.

Clear communication	- Sending information to primary schools to support the preparation of pupils. This could be in the form of a 'transition booklet' with information on times of the day, photographs of the school and teachers, a map, expectations, how to access the school website. - Communication from the secondary school about the classes, teachers, and timetable in a format accessible to pupils. - Coffee mornings for parents where pupils may need extra support to meet staff informally. - Information sheets for parents with contact names and emails. This could include signposting to school videos and other local support. - Ensuring that all subject teachers of a pupil have a copy of their pupil's SEND support plan/individual targets and support strategies.
Relationships	- Time for pupils to get to know others in their form, and their form tutor before formal academic learning begins. - The importance of developing a sense of belonging in the school setting for pupils in terms of reducing anxiety, increasing attendance and promoting emotional and academic well-being. - For vulnerable pupils or those with greater social, emotional and mental health difficulties the presence of a key adult in school is the overriding factor which promotes success. - (Where possible) Secondary staff (SENCO/form tutors) to visit primary settings to see a pupil in their current environment and to meet with the pupil to start to build a relationship with them. - The availability of the pastoral team or form tutors during break and lunchtimes so that there is always a known adult available to support pupils who may be struggling. - Whole school relational and restorative approaches to behaviour management which seek to build positive bonds with pupils to support co- and then self-regulation. This involves a curiosity about behaviour rather than a need to 'manage' it. - A key role for form tutors in greeting pupils positively and in checking in with them on a daily basis. In some cases, a pastoral member of staff to meet with the pupil before school to help them prepare for the day may also be necessary.

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.

The WARMTH approach has been developed in accordance with the growing evidence base of what works when supporting CYP with EBSA - See research for further details. It is highly recommended that schools embed these principles within their school context to support and promote engagement in learning.



Reflective questions to ask within the school's senior leadership team:

- *How well is our school doing against the areas of WARMTH?*
- *Do we have effective school policies and practices to address barriers to education?*
- *Do we ask children and young people about what would help them? And what they need?*
- *Do our staff feel supported?*
- *Do we have a system of support in place for the parents of children and young people who are struggling to attend school?*
- *Does our school have a supportive, neurodiversity friendly culture, values and approaches?*
- *How do we know if they are really fine?*

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 that there is a robust, evidence-informed intervention plan for those experiencing significant difficulty with attending school.

Within this guidance document, there is advice as to how you can implement the graduated response at three levels:

1) Preventative school wide approaches.
2) Targeted support for early signs of non-attendance.
3) Intervention for long-term absence

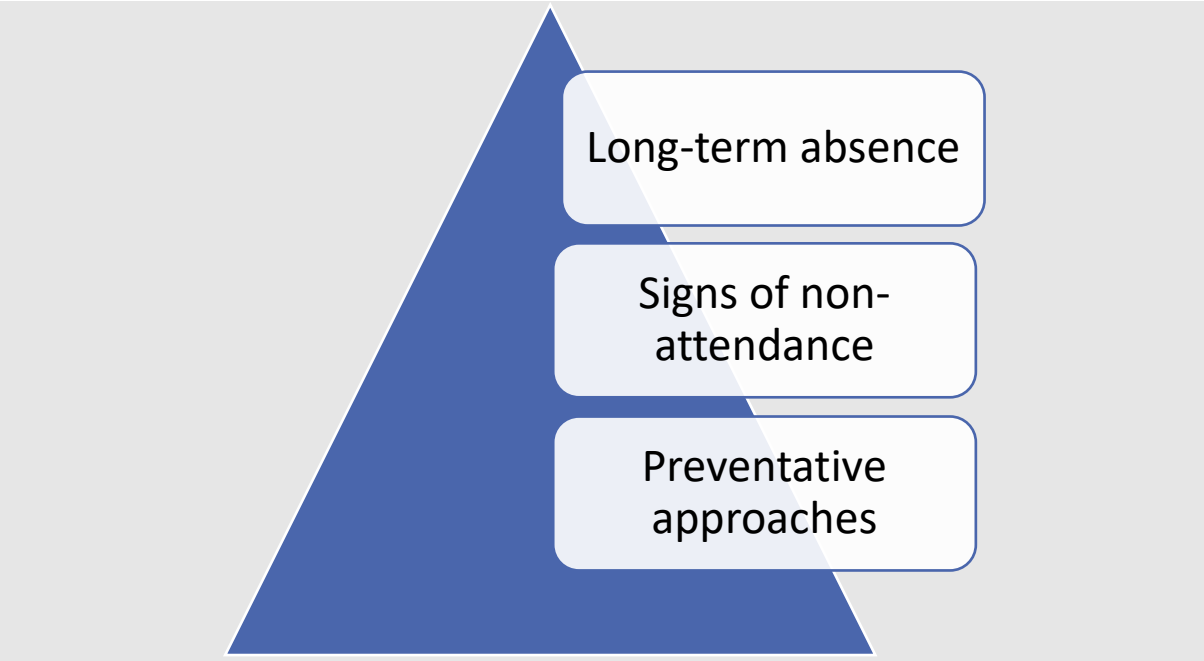


Figure 3: Graduated response for EBSA

Please also refer to the attendance graduated response for Sutton which has links to all support available.

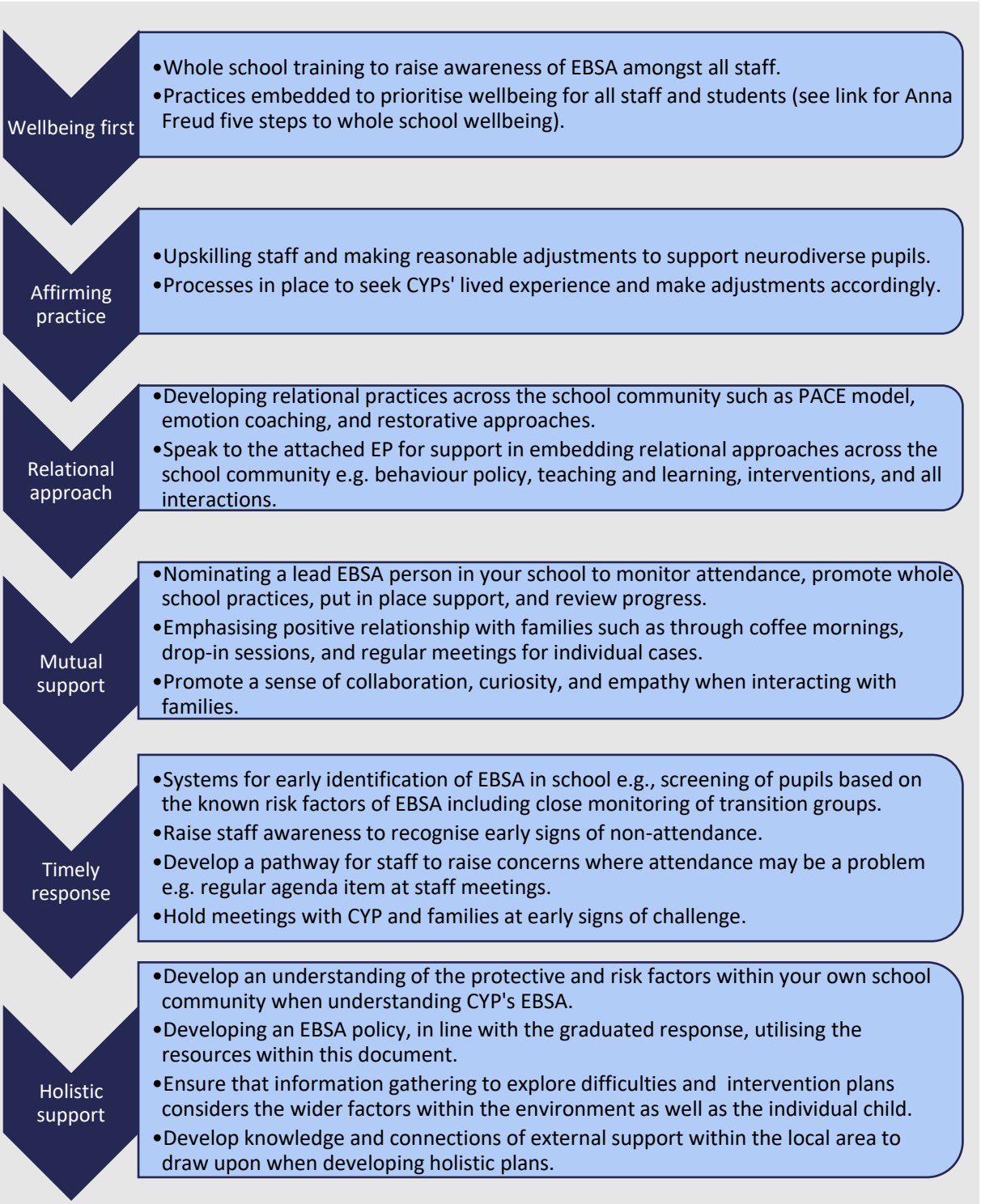


It is important that schools follow an assess, plan, do, review framework when a CYP shows early signs of non-attendance. This means holding regular meetings with key stakeholders to assess and understand the CYPs' lived experience, develop SMART targets, plan agreed actions informed by the evidence base, provide time for strategies to be embedded, and review and adjust accordingly. This is integral to supporting CYPs' EBSA journey towards re-engagement.

Please click the link for a support plan template

Preventive school wide approaches

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 schools to evaluate their whole school practices to consider ways in which to provide further support in this area. The following provides examples of ways in which schools can embed the WARMTH approach at a preventative level.



Complete the whole-school self-evaluation tool to identity areas of focus for your school.

Targeted intervention for EBSA

This pathway offers a stepped response to intervening following assess, plan, do, review, which should begin at the earliest signs of patterns of non-attendance.

First sign of sporadic non-attendance

- Communicate with parents/carers to develop shared understanding of primary function of avoidance and risk and resiliency factors.
- Communicate with CYP to explore what they are finding it difficult about school.
- Attendance closely monitored by a nominated member of staff, alongside other indicators of increasing anxiety.
- Enrol the YP in an emotional literacy intervention (e.g. ELSA or EWP).
- Explore unmet needs e.g. informal consultation with school EP for initial problem-solving.

Patterns of non-attendance identified

- Develop an action plan with all relevant people involved, using the information gained from the above activities to inform the intervention plan.
- Ensure plan is personalised and flexible.
- All relevant members of school staff made aware of the situation and the consistency of the approach is heavily emphasised.
- Consider Early Help assessment or signposting to Sutton Uplift.
- Ensure that the family are highly involved in the action plan – see link to advice and appendix for parent intervention framework.

Little progress in response to action plan

- Involvement of an external professional to support the review of the action plan 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.
- Consider referral to VPP for STARS support.
- 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).

Out of school

- 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. Consider referral to Complex Attendance Panel.
- Consideration of whether pupil is medically unable to attend school

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).

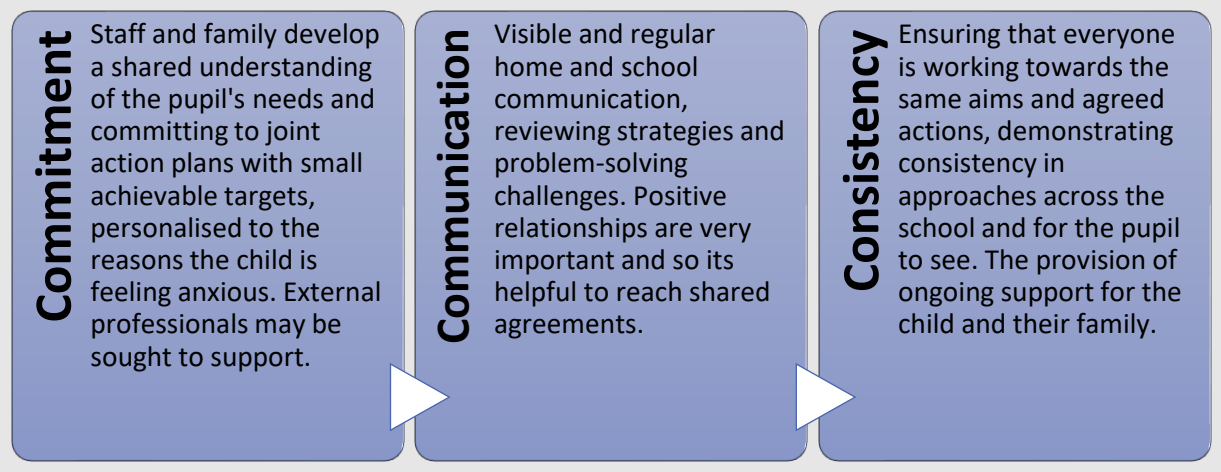
Action planning is an important part of getting a CYP back into school and needs to be part of a joined-up approach by the school, CYP, parents/carers and any other professionals involved. It is important that the action plan is based on a clear understanding of why the CYP is not attending school, and evidence-based strategies to support their journey.

The action planning meeting should include:

- Strengths and works working well currently
- Summary of identified barriers (see four Ps)
- Shared understanding of the function of the behaviour (see school avoidance scale)
- CYPs' views
- SMART target setting (aim for this to be very small steps that can be achieved within 2-4 weeks to demonstrate success/motivation).
- Agreed actions for school, home, and CYP.
- Review meeting date established.

Please see the support/action plan template

Key element of action planning:



Please see research on five key themes for fostering a successful return to school.

Targeted strategies

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).
- 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.
- 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 for each day, going through the structures of the day and what to expect.

Family factors



- Targeted Early Help provide whole family support from a Specialist Support Worker following completion of an EHAT and family plan.
- Provide psychoeducation of anxiety and avoidance to parents.
- Emphasise strong relationships between school and family.
- 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.
- 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.

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

- Explore the CYPs' views about school to identify risk and resiliency factors that can be changed.
- 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 to develop their understanding of anxiety and how it impacts on them. For example, the Cognus EP service EBSA Guidance for children and '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.

Long-term absence

For most students, good school attendance is a protective factor for their mental health and wellbeing and improves their life chances. Families that are well supported by schools, often through a trusting relationship with a key adult, can work together to agree on gradual adjustments that enable children to return happily to school. In Sutton there are many examples of professionals doing brilliant work supporting families affected by EBSA. For a very small minority of pupils, the anxieties they have related to school are so intense that continued focus on school attendance is re-traumatising and causes, in the short term, more harm than good. It is these students who may be experiencing burnout, and who instead of an immediate focus on getting them back into school require a recovery programme which focuses on their wellbeing as a priority. This includes:

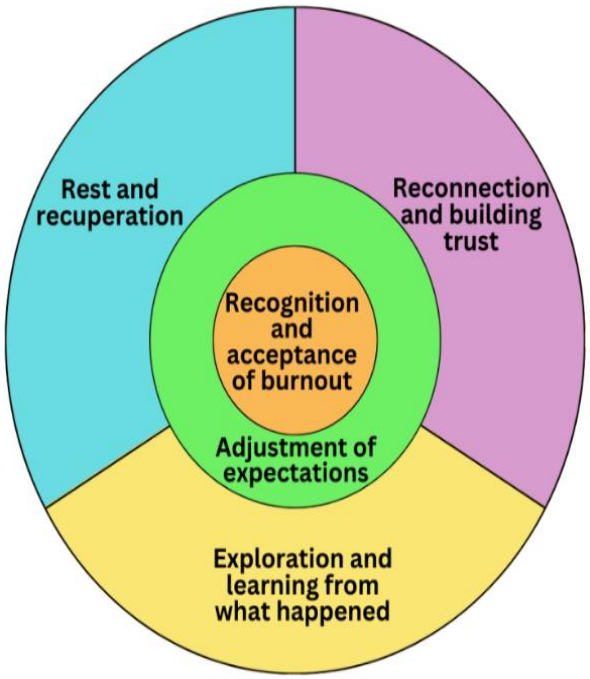
Recognition and acceptance of burnout: Recognise level of mental distress, get appropriate support, and gradually return to daily routines.

Adjustment of expectations: Reduce demands, triggers and expectations, and provide a low arousal environment.

Rest and recuperation: Provide time for rest (whatever this looks like for the CYP), permission, patience, and recuperation.

Reconnecting and building trust: Develop trusted relationships (this may need to be a fresh face in school), validation of the experience that they have had, and ongoing regulation support. Ensure that you create safe foundations and a strong support network before focusing on a return to education.

Exploration and learning from what happened: Explore with the pupil their perception of what happened and how the environment contributed.



Considerations:

The model is purposefully cyclical as it may be the case that a CYP revisits different stages, based on their own wellbeing journey. It is important to seek professional advice to inform the recovery plan with reviews held frequently within the professional network. Professionals include Attendance Team, Educational Psychology Service, and CAMHs (if involved) etc.

This approach should be trauma-informed and relational, requiring creative thinking to explore the ways in which CYP can have time to focus on their wellbeing, and work towards preparing for adulthood in a way that meets their social and emotional needs as well as their educational aspirations and potential.

It will be important to set targets and actions that focus on each area of the recovery model, with frequent reviews involving all professionals involved. It is important that schools continue to be active contributors to supporting the CYP's recovery journey. The following provides some suggestions of how the recovery model may be implemented.

Recognition and acceptance of burnout:

- There is recognition amongst the professional network and family that the CYP is experiencing extreme levels of stress, exhaustion and burn-out in response to levels of anxiety related to their school experience.
- There is a comprehensive understanding of the CYP's protective and risk factors, functions of avoidance, and ways in which their anxiety presents.
- There has been extensive support in place to try to alleviate these anxieties, following assess plan do review, and despite this, there is agreement that the CYP is demonstrating a trauma response to being in school.
- Parents are actively involved in the process, and the professional network are supporting parents to understand their child's anxieties and wellbeing and ways in which to support them within the home.

Adjustment of expectations:

- The immediate pressure of attending school and classroom learning is reduced/minimised and a short-term plan for time away from school is agreed upon.
- For this period of time alternative targets for their education are implemented and are the focus of support e.g., targets related to well-being, pursuit of creative activities etc.
- It may be the case the people working with the CYP do not talk about school for a short period of time, focusing instead on wellbeing to enable the CYPs levels of stress to reduce to a manageable level
- Regular meetings are held with the CYP, family, and the professional network to set targets to support the CYP and to closely monitor and review these.,

Rest and recuperation:

- Planning activities that focus on wellbeing, regulation, and down-time is prioritised, ideally linked to the CYP's interests and hobbies. When a student is out of school this would have to be things that a parent/carer would support, with check-ins from the school.
- Implementing an intense package of support to promote wellbeing which focuses on confidence, resilience, psychoeducation of anxiety, grounding techniques etc to support the CYP to develop emotional readiness. Consider using resources such as the 'Overcoming your child's feelings and worries' book.
- Developing a co-regulation plan to support the CYP to understand their different emotion states and agreed strategies for them to use to regulate based on different feelings e.g. using zone of regulation approach that is used to trial a small step return to 'normality'.
- Consider flexi-schooling options* where deemed appropriate.

Please click the link to a coregulation plan template

Reconnecting and building trust:

It is important that all the adults supporting the CYP focus on developing a psychological sense of safety first. Only once this has been achieved, can there be a discussion about reconnecting with education and attending school.

- A focus on supporting the CYP to develop at least one trusted, safe, and secure relationship with an adult outside the home. This may be an external professional and would ideally be a member of school staff. This is paramount for effective relational practices to support wellbeing, confidence, and a sense of safety.
- In some cases relational work between the child and parent may be required if it is felt that a form of separation anxiety is leading to the school anxiety.
- Mentoring programmes to support the CYP to develop a supportive relationship with a trusted adult will be helpful to consider.
- Consider ways in which the CYP can spend time in school (if they are emotionally able to do so) engaging in relational activities that can support their positive experiences of school such as attending a club, returning for short periods of unstructured times with friends, assisting in a younger class or a subject of interest, or helping create resources for a subject of interest.
- School sending work home and teachers providing feedback on completed tasks. It is important that anxiety about missed learning does not compound other anxieties about school attendance.
- It may be helpful to consider motivational interviewing to support the CYP to be empowered to re-engage with education in some capacity which the EPS can support with.

The consideration of other alternative provisions for the CYP only on a temporary basis including:

- Creating a small group nurturing provision within school for EBSA students to complete learning in a safe, supportive environment away from the rest of school as part of a gradual return and reintegration.
- Creation of an informal 'resource base' for neurodivergent CYP who are academically capable but have significant difficulty with accessing the mainstream environment.
- Alternative provisions and tutoring such as Academy 21 used as part of the reintegration plan or when recommended by professionals.

Please click the link for case study examples in the local area using the WARMTH approach and recovery model!

Exploration and learning from what happened:

- Once a trusted relationship with an adult has been established and the CYP is demonstrating more positive wellbeing and resilience, there can begin discussions with the CYP about what happened including factors and/or events which led to their anxiety increasing. This will need to be done in a relational, restorative approach, seeking to explore the factors that contributed to the problem, rather than seeking to blame or punish.
- These discussions should focus on the protective factors and strengths which can be developed and expanded on to support reintegration as well as the challenges, and problems.
- These discussions should also seek to develop a toolbox of strategies that the CYP can use in times of distress as well as the available support within the home, school, and community.
- Any action plans or strategies agreed will need to be shared with all involved and it is important that consistency is ensured, as this will support the CYP to begin to develop trust in the school, the staff, and education.

*Flexischooling is an arrangement between parent and school where children of compulsory school age are registered at the school in the usual way but attend part-time and for the rest of the time they are home educated.

Any decisions regarding flexi-schooling should be made with school and parents working together in the best interest of the child. There is no parental right to flexi-schooling, and the onus is on families to approach the school with a plan, seeking support and agreement. The responsibility for flexi-school arrangements lies with the school and not the Local Authority. Schools should record a 'C' in the register and have safeguarding responsibility on the school days only, although they retain full funding for each child.

The Department for Education (DfE) recognises flexi-schooling as a valid full-time education. There is no pre-determined model for the amounts of time given to either of the settings and individual arrangements vary widely. An example may include attending school three days a week and receive a 'suitable education' at home on the other days.

When a CYP has been identified EBSA, the school and parents could work together to develop a bespoke plan in the form of flexischooling. The time outside of school could be spent for rest and recover, pursuing interests outside the curriculum, attending a forest school, attend an online school, volunteering, etc.

Although there is no legislation or statutory guidance relating to flexi-schooling, the DfE issued 'Elective home education - departmental guidance for local authorities' in April 2019, the section 'Flexi-schooling, and college attendance' is helpful

Integrating the WARMTH and Recovery approaches

The WARMTH approach (as mentioned above) should be embedded within all levels of the graduated response. When implementing the recovery model, the principles of WARMTH should be integral in all decision making. The following diagram provides examples of how the WARMTH approach can be applied for long-term absence cases.



Section 19

Section 19 places a duty on local authorities to arrange suitable education for children of compulsory school age who cannot access school because of illness, exclusion, or "otherwise" (a broad category which can include EBSA). The local authority's duty arises where a child is not receiving suitable education and is unable to attend school, regardless of whether they have an EHCP.

Section 19 is generally regarded as an **interim duty**: "How will this child receive an education whilst they are unable to attend school?"

EOTAS

EOTAS arises under Section 61 of the Children and Families Act 2014. It applies where a local authority is satisfied that it would be **inappropriate** for the child's special educational provision to be delivered in a school or post-16 institution.

Unlike Section 19:

- EOTAS is usually part of an EHCP
- it is a long-term educational arrangement
- provision is specified in Section F of the EHCP
- no school placement may be named in Section I.

The threshold is not simply that a child cannot currently attend school. The legal test is whether a school placement is inappropriate for meeting the child's needs.

EOTAS may include:

- home tuition
- online learning
- therapeutic provision
- mentoring
- alternative provision settings
- community-based learning
- vocational placements

EHE

Elective Home Education occurs when parents choose to assume responsibility for providing their child's education under Section 7 Education Act 1996.

Parents must provide education that is efficient, suitable, full-time, and appropriate to the child's age, ability, aptitude and SEND needs.

National guidance warns against families feeling pressured into EHE because appropriate support is unavailable, attendance concerns are escalating, or the child is struggling in school.

A parent may choose EHE because of EBSA, but EHE is a parental choice and not a substitute for local authority duties.

Appendices

Appendix A: Direct work with CYP for information gathering

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 they child's views about a variety of factors that could be contributing, or to order factors in a hierarchy – see link to talking mats resource.
- 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 they 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

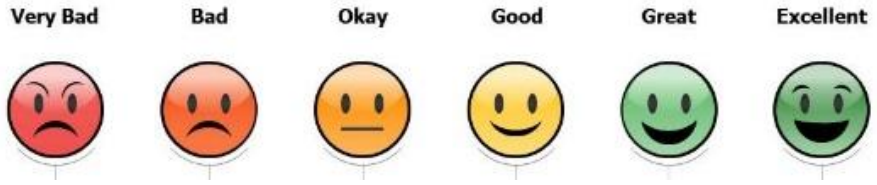
- If the child woke up tomorrow and all their problems had gone away, what would be different?
- If they were the headteacher of the school what would they change?
- When do they feel less worried about school? What is different at those times?

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 intervention workbook for children experiencing EBSA – see link.
- 'The Ideal Safe School' activity found here



Example questions:

- When I think about school, I feel…
- The things that make me feel this way are…
- The things that happen outside of school that can add to my feelings are…
- When I'm worried, I feel…
- Who can I talk to when I feel like this?
- On a scale of 1-10, with 0 feeling very good about attending school and not feeling stressed, to 10 feeling very anxious and stressed about attending school, where would you rate how you are feeling?
- If you had a magic wand and could grant one wish, what would it be?
- What do you do when you are not in school?
- What would be the best outcome for you?
- What other things interest you?

Appendix B: Direct work with CYP focusing on intervention

In almost all cases, it is going to be important for direct work to take place with the CYP to explore their anxieties, provide psychoeducation, explore school-based factors and experiences, and develop tangible next steps towards facing their fears and attending school. It will be important to consider who is most appropriate to deliver the intervention. The approaches taken will depend on the child's age, level of understanding and language skills. Please contact the EP service for advice on this type of intervention.

As part of this work, it will be important to construct an avoidance hierarchy with the young person; this should identify and rank situations from those which cause no or least anxiety, to those which provoke the most anxiety. It is important to think about coping techniques (internal resources) and support available (external resources) to support each step. These steps may need to be broken down into much smaller steps for some young people. It is important that this is agreed with the young person, based on an understanding of their anxieties about school, and takes place through small steps at a manageable pace.



For more guidance about using this approach see:
https://www.anxietycanada.com/sites/default/files/FacingFears_Exposure.pdf

Click the link to further gaining YP views resources available.

Click the link to an example intervention booklet to use with the CYP

Appendix C: Direct work with parents

The success of any EBSA intervention requires a collaborative approach with parents to be taken. It is therefore imperative that school staff work closely with the family to develop a shared understanding of the factors contributing to non-attendance and work together to develop agreed actions which can be implemented and reviewed periodically. A supportive, understanding, and collaborative approach is imperative.

Ways in which school staff can support parental engagement:

- Create a warm and welcoming ethos within the school community and encourage parents to come into school and inform them about how they and when they can make contact with key members of staff.
- Build a positive and supportive relationship with the wider family through ensuring that both parents, where possible, attend meetings.
- Hold parent coffee mornings to develop positive relationships and provide a warm and open school environment as well as provide psychoeducation around EBSA.
- Provide a key daily contact for the parent in a way that is manageable for school staff e.g., email with one 'what went well' and one 'challenge' of the day for the student.
- Provide non-judgemental support where parents are having difficulty. This is especially important when the anxiety of a pupil is enmeshed with parental anxiety.
- Being available and listening to concerns so that parents feel heard and trusts the school. Listening without always rushing to problem solving underpins collaborative and empowering conversations.
- Providing a solution-focused approach to explore what is working well and to maintain a sense of positivity about the situation once everyone is in agreement about what the 'problem' is.
- Signpost services and resources which are available to the family.

The school may want to deliver an individual or group parent/carer session(s). This could include:

- Psychoeducation about anxiety and avoidance (see Cognus EBSA parent guidance – link).
- Exploration of risk and resiliency factors.
- Functions of school avoidance (parents can be invited to complete the scale).
- Action planning based on individual circumstances.
- Provide general good practice strategies for supporting at home such as boundary setting, rewards/sanctions, and morning and evening routines.
- Support with managing the day if their child is not in school.

Please ask your EP for more ideas or if you would like to run a session together.

Ultimately for successful inclusion and reintegration of a student into a learning environment there needs to be school staff and families who are working together. This would include regular two-way communication and visible collaboration between parents and school staff. Collaboration will be underpinned by a shared understanding of the child (Ps and Fs), joint action planning and consistency from all involved. As the school sends home work parents must support this and all will need to use the same positive and predictable messaging. When things don't go to plan adults need to be reflective, resilient and continue to plan for the next steps and the shared goal.

Click the link to an example parent carer workshop PPT

Appendix D: 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
- 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
- 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.

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

Appendix E: Case studies

Primary case study example

Year 4 boy (pseudonym James) was not attending school for ten months. The professional network used the recovery model and WARMTH approach to support him. James is now in Year 6 and attending each day, for part of the day. The below table describes the steps involved in each aspect of the recovery model with reference to the WARMTH approach.

Recognition and acceptance of burnout: - Professional network acknowledged significant emotional challenges James was experiencing related to school and developed shared understanding of his lived experience and shared responsibility *(mutual understanding).*
Adjustment of expectations: - Short-term agreement to reduce pressure of attending school and set up regular multi-agency consultations including James' parents and school to develop targets, actions, and reviews that focus on his wellbeing as a priority *(wellbeing first).* - The consultations were regular and consistent (consultations took place in summer holidays too) which was central to measuring small steps of progress, adjusting plans and maintaining a shared understanding and goal *(timely response).*
Rest and recuperation: - Assistant EP made weekly visits to James to engage in enjoyable activities at home and building up to activities in the community. Some of these activities were related to developing his confidence, resilience and wellbeing *(wellbeing first).*
Reconnecting and building trust: - James' TA began to join some of the visits with the Assistant EP to develop a positive rapport, and James' teacher sent frequent postcards/letters home to update him on what was happening in class. - All actions that were agreed were consistently put in place to build trust between James, family and school *(relational approach).* - James begun to re-engage in learning outside of the classroom initially using an AV1 robot. This developed his confidence and sense of belonging in class before he was ready to enter himself (*relational approach).*
Exploration and learning from what happened: - There was a commitment to understand James' perspective and ensure this was central to decision making. The professional network explored protective and risk factors contributing to James' anxiety about school *(mutual understanding).* - This involved supporting James to understand his diagnoses of ADHD and support the family to pursue an autism assessment *(affirming practice).* - In all support, James was seen as a whole child, not just an EBSA case. Other factors such as a bereavement were considered and supported through counselling *(holistic support).* - Strengths and interests were considered such as a friend in school which supported a sense of belonging and James' interest in music as a motivating factor *(holistic support).* - Once James was feeling a sense of psychological safety, developed positive rapport with key staff, and showed willingness to learn, a plan was created to learn from what happened and consider next steps.

Secondary case example

Year 11 girl (pseudonym Sarah) was not attending school for one year. Regular multi-agency meetings were held between school staff, Virtual School (VS) Case Manager, Specialist Support Worker (SSW) and Educational Psychologist (EP) to develop a plan using the recovery and WARMTH models. It's still early days, but the YP has started to increasingly engage in support.

Recognition and acceptance of burnout:

- Repeated cycles of assess, plan, do, review had taken place between school and home to support reintegration. *(mutual understanding).*
- Despite strong parental engagement and school's efforts, Sarah found it very difficult to attend. She was experiencing high levels of anxiety about school and despite the plan each evening to attend, she had only been in three days in the term. *(mutual understanding).*

Adjustment of expectations:

- Professional network discussed achievable and relevant targets for Sarah to achieve by the end of Year 11 which focused on increased structures and routines at home and sitting and achieving at least some of her GCSEs. *(mutual understanding).*
- There was recognition amongst the professional network to reduce the expectations of attending school and explore alternative avenues to meet the targets agreed. (*wellbeing first)*
- Regular meetings between VS advisor, school, SSW, and family were agreed to develop and review actions towards the agreed targets in liaison with Sarah. (*timely response)*

Rest and recuperation:

- A weekly timetable was created to develop structures around healthy habits at home, with SSW supporting the family. *(wellbeing first)*
- The timetable included downtime to engage in grounding, regulatory activities and Sarah's sessions with the Child Psychologist supported with activities related to this. *(wellbeing first)*

Reconnecting and building trust:

- The timetable included time to meet with a key adult each week to develop a positive relationship – this was focused on a wellbeing check, reviewing the timetable, responding to potential challenges, and developing a plan for the following week. *(relational approach)*
- Conversations also focused on her aspirations for post-16, using the PfA areas. *(holistic support).*
- Given Sarah is academically able, and motivated to do well in her learning, Sarah's timetable included time to engage in her core subjects at home and she had regular feedback from her teachers. Sarah reported that knowing she wasn't expected to go back to school, allowed her to feel increasingly able to engage in this learning (as best she could). *(holistic support).*
- There was also planned time for Sarah to engage in social activities. For example, a youth-group related to Quakers as this was important to her. *(holistic support).*
- Once she was feeling increasingly able, discussions began for an agreed time for Sarah to attend an aspect of school that is the least anxiety inducing (e.g. RAG rating her school day and choosing a green rated time). This was not educational, but an opportunity for her to spend time in school and experience lower levels of anxiety to increase her confidence and enjoyment of being in the school setting. This is still in the planning stage. *(wellbeing first).*

Exploration and learning from what happened:

- Information was gathered within the professional network to understand Sarah's strengths and challenges. Within the first month, Sarah had increasingly followed the timetable (above) with some small setbacks as would be expected. The next steps are to continue to support Sarah in following the timetable and targets and then consider plans to support the transition to Post-16. *(holistic support)*

Secondary case example

Year 9 pupil (pseudonym Leo) had recently moved to the school but was not exhibiting good attendance. He had moved between a number of schools, having lived in different areas had also been excluded from one. On beginning in his new school his attendance was sporadic and Leo was communicating that he didn't see the point in coming to school. A request for support was made to the Educational Psychologist (EP) to help school staff to identify strategies to improve his engagement with education and attendance at school.

Recognition and acceptance of burnout:

- In this instance Leo's non-attendance didn't seem to be underpinned by burnout related to school but in fact multiple experiences of rejection from education and exclusion *(mutual understanding).*
- Although Leo had not been attending for long it was felt that it would be useful to involve the EP and work on a plan to improve his attendance before this dropped even further *(timely response).*

Adjustment of expectations:

- School staff worked with the EP to explore the experiences of rejection Leo had experienced at home and in school, and through doing so could apply a more empathic response towards him and the behaviours he was displaying (*wellbeing first).*
- It was decided that any decision making would need to include Leo as he had already lost a lot of trust in adults. Weekly updates about support and any decisions being made about his home situations were agreed (*mutual understanding).*

Rest and recuperation:

- Although Leo was not feeling motivated about school his mental health and well-being were not primarily of concern. Actions instead were devised around meeting his learning needs and supporting him to develop regulation strategies. It was decided that Leo would complete a writing intervention to increase his proficiency and support him in feeling confident to attend literacy-based lessons*(wellbeing first).*
- Leo's sleep was of concern as he identified often feeling too tired to come into school until the afternoon. A pastoral member of staff agreed to work with him on devising a plan to address his sleep cycle *(wellbeing first).*

Reconnecting and building trust:

- Leo began engaging well with his literacy intervention so the member of staff working with him on this began to spend more time with him, finding him for check-ins during the day and meeting him when he arrived in school *(relational approach).*
- Adults in school supported Leo's desire to move into vocational learning quickly and explored different options for him once he finished in school so that he knew the pathway he wanted to take *(holistic support).*
- Through involving Leo in decisions, he built up trust with a range of adults and was able to open up about other situations at home which seemed to be reinforcing his non-attendance in school, and which could be addressed *(holistic support).*

Exploration and learning from what happened:

- Through recognising the relationships that Leo was building with members of school staff adults could support him to accept challenges and recognise with him the successes that he was experiencing. He was also able to open up about other worries which could be addressed which all contributed to his attendance increasing. He is now much more positive about school *(holistic support).*

Appendix F: Research evidence

Key research references:

- Burtonshaw & Dorell (2023). Listening to and learning from parents in the attendance crisis.
- Chian (2022). Emotional based school avoidance: Exploring staff and pupil voices on provision in mainstream school – link.
- Corcoran, Bond and Knox (2022) Emotionally based school non-attendance: Two successful returns to school following lockdown – link.
- Hamilton (2024) Emotionally based school avoidance in the aftermath of the Covid-19 Pandemic: Neurodiversity, agency and belonging in school – link.
- Heyne et al., (2024) Embracing change: from recalibration to radical overhaul for the field of school attendance. – link.
- Lester and Michelson (2024) Perfect storm: emotionally based school avoidance in the post-Covid-19 pandemic context – link.
- Neilson and Bond (2023) *After a long period of being in hibernation – these little green shoots were growing'.* Lived experiences of effective support for autistic young people who have experienced extended school nonattendance. – link.

Key links to additional guidance relating to attendance:

- Children missing education statutory DfE guidance – link.
- Keeping children safe in education statutory DfE guidance – link.
- Education for children with health needs who cannot attend school statutory DfE guidance – see link.
- Mental health and behaviour in schools non statutory DfE guidance – link.
- Promoting the education of children with a social worker non-statutory DfE guidance – link.

Corcoran, Bond and Knox, 2022 research: Emotionally based school non-attendance: two successful returns to school following lockdown

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.



Popoola and Sivers, 2024 research, Key recommendations – 21st century learners

