

EMOTIONALLY BASED SCHOOL AVOIDANCE (EBSA) : TOOLKIT FOR SCHOOLS AND EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

CONTENTS:

INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS EBSA?

EBSA AS A SPECTRUM OF NEED

**FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO EBSA (ANXIETY, FUNCTIONS OF EBSA,
RISK & RESILIENCE, PUSH & PULL FACTORS)**

EARLY IDENTIFICATION OF CHILDREN AT RISK

WHAT HELPS IN SCHOOL?

UNIVERSAL AND TARGETED SUPPORT (ASSESS PLAN DO REVIEW)

FURTHER RESOURCES/ PRACTICAL IDEAS

REFERENCES

APPENDICES

INTRODUCTION

Hammersmith and Fulham Educational Psychology Service has developed this document in response to the increased prevalence of children and young people who are experiencing difficulties with school attendance.

Research has shown that children and young people with poor attendance are less likely to succeed academically at both primary and secondary school, and are more likely to not be in education, employment or training when they leave school (Department for Education, 2018; 2020). Non-attendance that is persistent over time is also associated with reduced future aspirations, poor emotional regulation, low self-esteem, social-emotional development, and mental health difficulties (Lee, 2019; Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Flakierska-Praquin et al, 1997).

The importance of early identification is highlighted, so that support for the pupils most at risk of non-attendance can be implemented at an early stage before the problem escalates. The document includes practical guidance and useful resources for professionals working in schools to support young people in feeling confident and secure at school.

Prevalence of EBSA Locally

From a review of cases in schools undertaken 2023 it is estimated we have upward of 200 young people across the borough who are missing substantial periods of schooling due to emotional difficulties with attendance.

What our children and young people have told us

WHAT IS EBSA?

EBSA is a widely used term to describe children and young people who are experiencing persistent and severe challenges with attending school due to various emotional based factors. This often results in frequent and prolonged absences from school (West Sussex Guidance, 2018). Historically, other terms have been used to describe school non-attendance including 'school phobia', 'school refusal' and 'truancy' (Kearny, 2007; Pelligrini, 2008).

It is important to be mindful of the language that we use to describe children and young people that are not attending school. Terms such as 'school refusal' locate the issue within the child. Often, it is the overwhelming feelings of stress and anxiety that prevent the children and young people from being able to attend school. Whilst terminology varies across published literature (see Tamlyn, 2022 for detailed discussion), the term used throughout this guidance is emotionally based-school avoidance (EBSA) in line with the current established terminology in the UK educational psychology community (West Sussex County Council [WSCC], 2018; Rae, 2020). This acknowledges the fact that the child or young person (CYP) often doesn't feel that they have control over the situation and that it is NOT an active choice from the child not to attend. The term EBSA acknowledges that the behaviour (avoidance) has an emotional root (often anxiety) which is related to multiple factors at the individual, family and school levels, as will be explored later in this guidance.

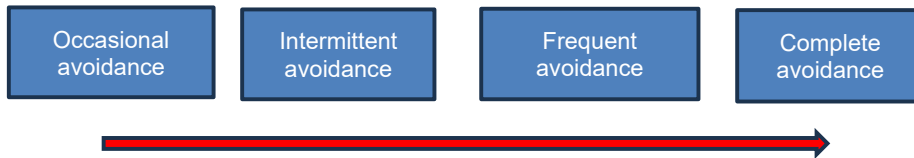
EBSA is often complex, and it can be difficult to differentiate EBSA and other reasons for poor attendance, including physical illness; parent/carer-controlled absence and truancy.

EBSA is not a diagnosis and there is not one core need or collection of needs common to all children and young people who experience EBSA. Focusing on or trying to identify one simple reason for EBSA may result in missed opportunities for early intervention. The overwhelming anxiety that children and young people experience is likely to be an interplay of various underlying factors, which may include special educational needs (SEN), adverse life experiences and developmental needs. Developing an understanding of each child or young person's individual experience as well as the formation of strong and trusting relationships between children and young people and adults in school is key to supporting them to feel less anxious about attending school.

An important question to ask is **whether the pupil is experiencing a significant level of distress in attending school and/or participating in certain aspects of school life?**

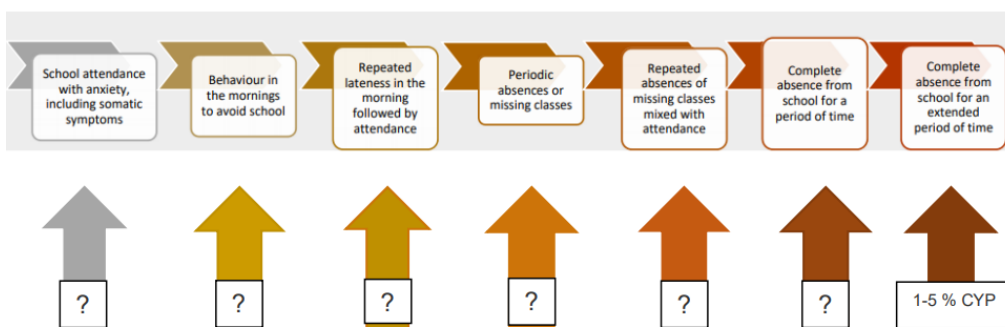
EBSA AS A SPECTRUM OF NEED

EBSA occurs along a continuum of need which includes those children and young people who are showing the early signs as described above and at risk of becoming persistent non-attenders. Thambirajah et al (2008) conceptualised EBSA as a spectrum of need.



Adapted from: Thambirajah et al (2008)

This has recently been expanded on by South Gloucestershire EPS (2023), who highlight the differing presentations of children and young people who experience anxiety and stress about aspects of the school environment or experience. Some of these children and young people may have good overall school attendance but are persistently missing particular lessons or parts of the school day, or experiencing stress and anxiety which is significantly impacting on their functioning and wellbeing.



ANXIETY

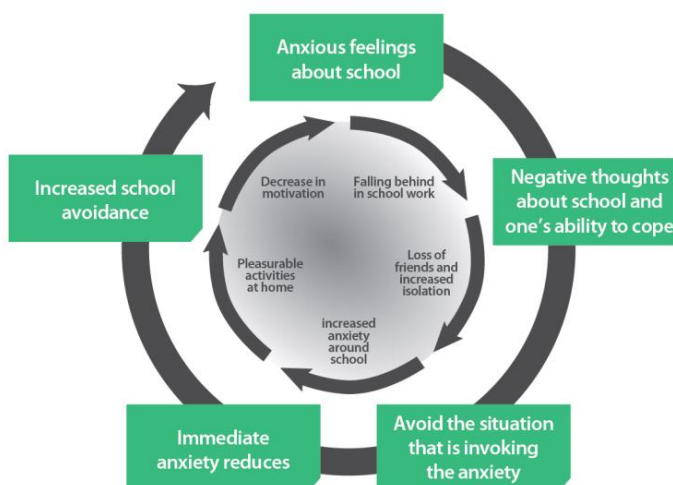
It is essential to understand the role of anxiety, which has been identified as a key feature of EBSA. It is important to recognise and distinguish between 'normal' levels of anxiety that all children and young people will experience from time to time, and the persistent and pervasive levels of anxiety associated with EBSA.

Anxiety is a normal emotion and we would expect all children and young people to experience low levels of anxiety about some aspects of school from time to time. For example, at the start of a new school year, before a presentation to their class, or prior to and during assessments and exams. However, we would expect that the majority of children are able to tolerate and overcome this anxiety (possibly with some temporary support) and that it would not impact their functioning or wellbeing in the longer term.

However, children and young people who experience EBSA often present with significant anxiety and fear about attending school, which impacts on their ability to cope. Anxiety results in thoughts, feelings and physiological symptoms (e.g. nausea, vomiting, shaking, sweating, heavy/fast breathing and panic attacks) which can be overwhelming and unpleasant. It is a natural reaction to want to avoid the situations that contribute to these unpleasant feelings, as this often results in some temporary relief. West Sussex EPS note that young people who are anxious tend to overestimate the perceived 'threat' of school and will also underestimate and lack confidence in their ability to cope.

When anxiety is linked to school avoidance, this can lead to a cycle which can serve to reinforce and maintain EBSA over time (see Figure X).

Figure X.
EBSA Anxiety cycle (taken from WSCC EBSA guidance)



FUNCTIONS OF EBSA

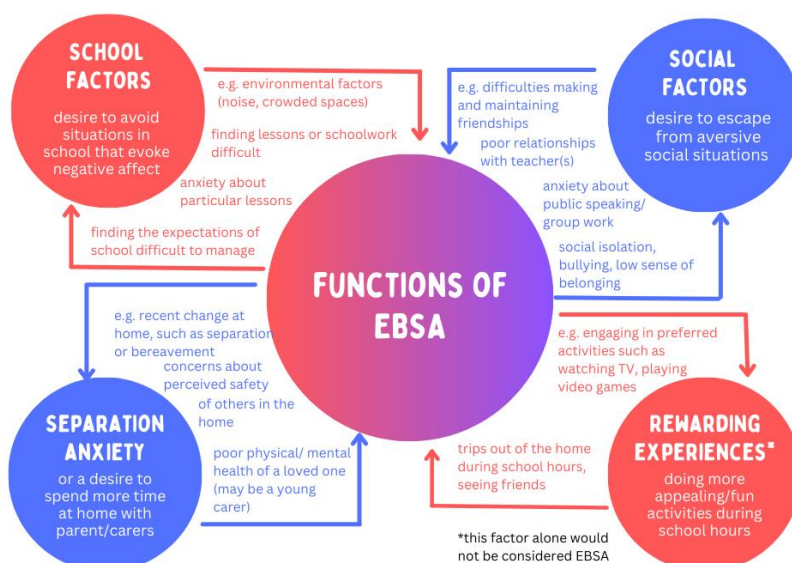
Children and young people experiencing EBSA are not a homogenous group, and the factors contributing factors to an individual child's anxiety about school are often complex, multi-faceted and may change over time. However, the research literature has identified some common risk factors for EBSA, as well as some of the reasons that children and young people may begin to show signs of EBSA.

It can be helpful to think of all behaviour as being functional, that is, to consider what unmet needs avoiding school fulfils for the child or young person, as well as what the non-attendance is communicating in terms of expressing feelings or unmet needs.

Staffordshire EPS (2020) suggest consideration of the following questions:

- Avoiding school is the solution to **what problem** for the child?
- What outcome is the child's non-attendance **achieving for them**?
- What are the child's non-attendance behaviours telling us about **how they are feeling**?
- What are the child's non-attendance behaviours telling us about **what they need**?

Research by Kearney & Silverman (1990) has identified four common 'functions' of EBSA that underpin the difficulties with attending school. Often, children and young people experiencing EBSA present with a combination of these four functions, which can be thought of as factors that **push** and **pull** a child away from school and towards school. It is important to note that the fourth function, of 'rewarding experiences' may be true of some children experiencing EBSA, but this function without the presence of at least one other would NOT be considered EBSA.



RISK AND RESILIENCE FACTORS

Although we know that there are a wide range of reasons why children may experience difficulties attending school, the literature shows that there are some factors that may increase a child's risk of experiencing EBSA. These can be broadly be categorised as factors relating to the school, the family, and the child themselves. **There may also be some wider community factors.**

School	Family	Child	Community
Bullying	Separation, divorce or change in family dynamic	Social anxiety	Racism
Difficulties in specific subject	Parent physical and mental health challenges	Low self-confidence	Social media
Transition to secondary school, key stage or change of school	Attachment relationship with parent	Physical illness/injury	Gang membership
Academic demands/high levels of pressure and performance-orientated classrooms	High levels of family stress	Learning needs (identified or unidentified)	Transport or journey to school
Exams	Domestic violence or abuse	Separation anxiety	Community safety
Lack of positive relationships with peers and/or staff	Loss or bereavement	Experiences of trauma	
Finding the environment overwhelming (e.g. noise, crowds etc)	Family history of EBSA, or sibling non-attendance	Health anxiety	
Structure of the school day	Financial situation	Uncertainty about future aspirations beyond school	
Unpredictability of environment	Being a young carer		

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Table X. Taken from West Sussex EPS (2022), Brent **Camden**

As well as identifying risk factors, it is also important to identify areas of strength and resilience within the child and their family and school, so that these can be sustained and built upon to support the child to attend school and reduce their feelings of anxiety.

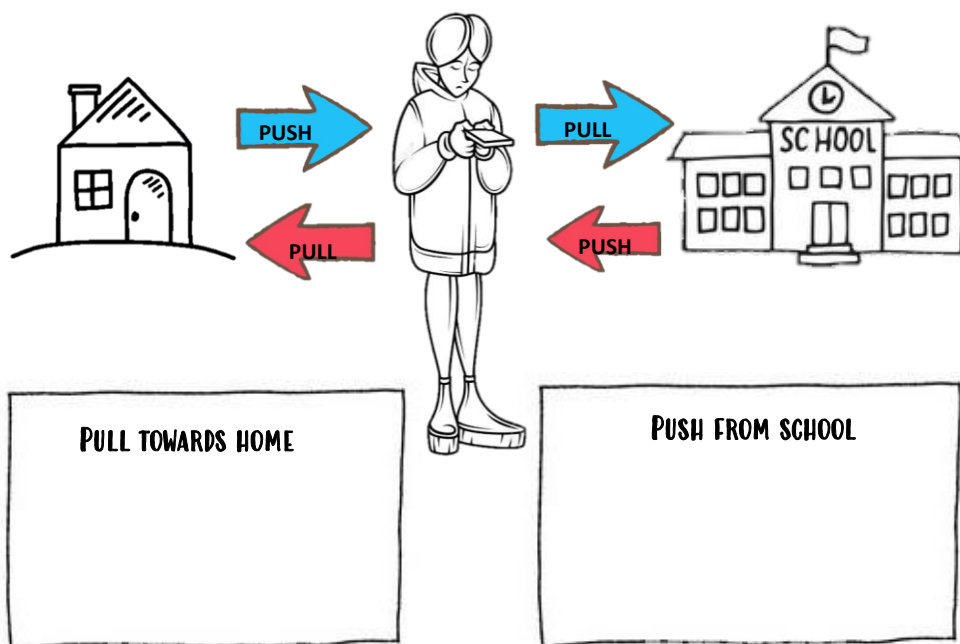
West Sussex EPS suggest that such resilience factors may include:

- Developing ambition, aspiration and motivation
- Increasing confidence, self-esteem, self-efficacy, value in themselves
- Developing feelings of safety, security and a sense of belonging
- Having positive experiences where they can succeed
- Holding positive relationships with peers or staff
- Feeling listened to and understood
- Understanding the relationship between thoughts, feelings and behaviour
- Willingness to work in partnership between school, family and external professionals
- Developing parenting skills and understanding
- Flexibility of approaches within school, person centred listening to the voice of the child

PUSH AND PULL FACTORS

The areas of risk and resilience can also be thought of as factors that may **push** and **pull** a child away from/towards school.

Literature indicates that EBSA is most likely to occur when the risks are greater than resilience, when stress and anxiety exceeds support, and when the ‘pull’ factors that promote school avoidance overwhelm the ‘push’ factors that encourage school attendance.

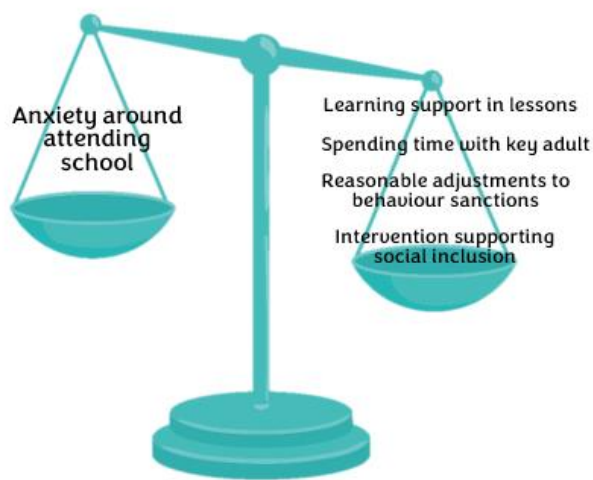


- Recent parental separation
- Worries about being away from parent
- Gets opportunity to pursue interests and hobbies at home

For example..

- Difficulties accessing learning
- Feeling overwhelmed by environmental/sensory aspects of school
- Frequent behaviour points
- Friendship difficulties
- Feeling that no one in school

By identifying and understanding the functions of EBSA and the push/pull factors for the individual child and their situation, we can begin to think about how to re-dress the balance and increase or create factors that pull them towards attending school.



EARLY SIGNS OF EBSA

EBSA may occur suddenly or gradually over a period of time. However, noticing the initial signs of EBSA and acting on them promptly is essential so that the most suitable support can be put in place for CYP before the situation escalates to the point where it is having a detrimental effect on their attendance, academic attainment and mental health. The longer EBSA remains unaddressed, the poorer the outcomes as the issue can become entrenched (West Sussex EPS, 2018). As well as their regular attendance monitoring systems, schools should be aware of the possible risk factors that may be present for individual children and young people (see below section on factors contributing to EBSA). Being curious about behaviour and trying not to make assumptions is also important.

Early indicators of EBSA

- Sporadic attendance and/or lateness
- Parent informing staff that CYP does not want to come to school
- CYP regularly complaining that they feel ill
- Changes in behaviour or variable behaviour e.g. reduced engagement in learning tasks; fewer interactions with peers

Indicators of EBSA

- Periods of prolonged absence
- Persistent lateness
- Parent/carer unable to support CYP to attend school
- Identifiable patterns of within school non-attendance e.g. specific days, subjects, staff members
- Providing minor reasons for school absences
- CYP experiences anxiety in relation to home factors e.g. parental separation, divorce, conflict, loss, bereavement
- CYP displays greater reliance upon family members e.g. separation anxiety, increased proximity
- Concerns around academic progress due to school non-attendance/missed education
- CYP displays increased anxiety in relation to their learning and/or poor self-concept as a learner
- Low self-esteem and/or lack of confidence
- Struggling in relation to peer relationships and/or social situations
- Physical signs of stress believed to be linked to stress (e.g. stomach ache, sickness, headache) or complaining of feeling ill
- Displays of emotional dysregulation and/or distress

Taken from Solihull Community Educational Psychology Service & Solar (2020): Collaborative working to promote attendance and Psychological wellbeing.

TRANSITION

Attendance difficulties can often start to develop around the time of a transition from one educational setting to another. The transition to secondary school can be particularly challenging for certain CYP, especially for those already feeling vulnerable, due to the numerous changes that are taking place, for example moving into a larger, unfamiliar setting, having many teachers as opposed to one, managing the increased workload and emphasis on independence skills, and having to form new social relationships are all daunting aspects of the transition.

Commented [BHH1]: [lancashire-ebpsa-guidance-strategy-toolkit-2023-update.pdf](#)

Pg 46-49 has some stuff on transition - there's some things to consider for schools which could act as a bit of a checklist ?

Commented [SCH2R1]: I have added it to universal provision as I think it is something that school should be doing anyway with all students as proactive preventative measure

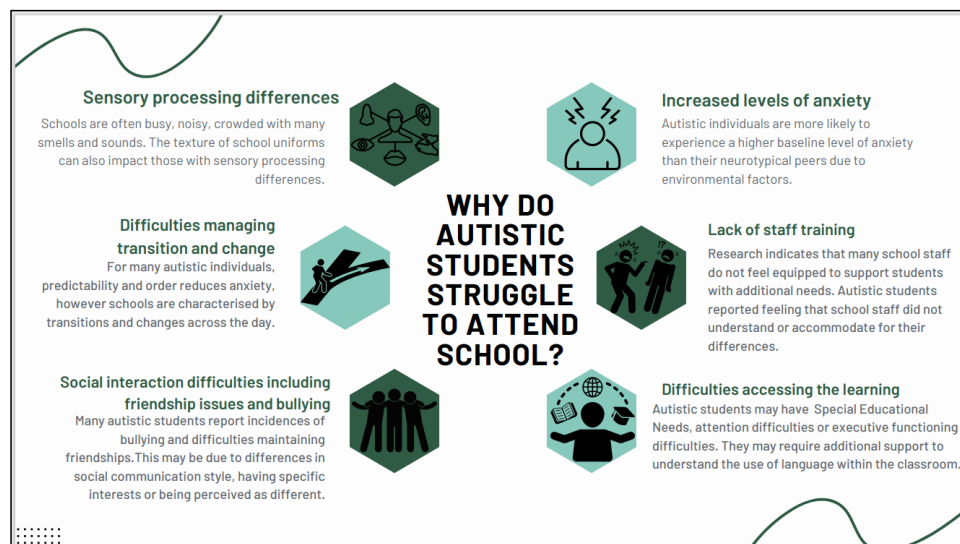
Rice et al (2011) reported that children who were concerned about the secondary transfer tended to view aspects of school negatively, displayed greater anxiety, felt pessimistic about the change, experienced low moods and already had social relationship issues. The majority of children adapt well to transition, but for those who don't, key factors need to be identified to reduce the risk of EBSA occurring (see page 16 for a checklist of vulnerable young people transitioning).

EBSA & SEND / AUTISM

Research suggests that children with SEND are more likely to experience higher level of anxiety than those without (Nelson & Harwood, 2011) resulting in school avoidance and persistent absenteeism (Filippello et al., 2020), particularly in CYP with autism (Ochi et al., 2020; Munkhaugen, et al., 2017). It appears that this relationship responds to a complex interaction of factors in the school, such as sensory challenges, difficulties with peer interactions including social isolation and victimisation, as well as academic difficulties. These factors compounded place children with SEND, particularly the autistic population, more at risk of experiencing high levels of anxiety which can result in difficulties with attendance. The image below illustrates the factors that may be involved in preventing autistic students from attending schools.

Figure X

Factors that may prevent autistic students from attending school (with thanks to Dr Mollie Higgins)



Therefore, when autistic children and young people are experiencing difficulties with attendance due to anxiety, it is important to unpick what are the factors that are contributing to their anxiety. Some autistic children may experience difficulties identifying and expressing what they are feeling and may become more anxious when asked to talk about their difficulties. As well as this, there may be additional sensory and social challenges that make it more difficult for them to express what are feeling, which needs to be considered by school staff and professionals working with them.

Gathering children's views in an autistic friendly manner with visual structure that with visual tools such as the ones suggested in this guidance (i.e. Mapping the Landscape of your School, The EBSA wellbeing Cards and the Ideal School- see *Gathering children's views* section) can support them to identify and express their views and feelings about school and unpick the areas/situations in school that are causing the most anxiety (e.g. busy corridors, certain lessons, playtimes). Schools can also seek advice from professionals such as EPs and autism specialist teachers on how to do this. Early identification is key, so it is important that schools are attentive and proactive, putting the right support in a timely manner to avoid attendance issues from becoming entrenched. For example, a study by Higgins (2023) used the 'Ideal school' tool (Moran) as a way to gather the view of autistic young people about the school they would like and not like to be in, in a visual manner. 'Mapping the Landscape of your School' ([for strategies see WSCC Appendix 6](#))

Commented [ED3]: Not sure if this is useful to mention as just repetition of above?

The new government guidance on mental health issues affecting pupil's attendance (DfE, 2023) states that a child with a SEND need may be more anxious about attending school and under the Equality Act (2010), schools ought to ensure that they make reasonable adjustments to improve attendance of all children but particularly for children with SEND. Thus, when planning support for CYP with attendance difficulties, it is key to consider whether there are underlying SEND needs. The section below addresses what schools can do for all children experiencing EBSA, which will also apply to children with SEN/autism. However, it is important that schools are particularly attentive to early signs of EBSA in autistic children and young people, and that they act early on - preventing anxiety building to the point of non-attendance. A well organised and responsive SEN department is an important factor in the prevention an early intervention of EBSA for children with SEN, including autism.

WHAT HELPS IN SCHOOL?

EBSA is a complex issue that can be influenced by various factors, including anxiety, social difficulties, academic challenges, and emotional difficulties. Schools play a crucial role in supporting children who experience school refusal. Research has pointed out factors for a successful reintegration into school and improvement in children's wellbeing for EBSA. These factors include:

Commented [DEH4]: Not sure why we are straight into reintegration at this point - should prevention come first or is this a kind of overview section?

- **A whole school approach to wellbeing that promotes a sense of belonging:** create a school environment that is welcoming, inclusive and supportive environment that promotes a sense of belonging. Foster positive relationships between children and

educational staff to make the school a safe and nurturing place. The more we can provide universal adjustments, the less reasonable adjustment plans that are needed. By enabling an inclusive and nurturing environment for all, we are preventing children and young people from experiencing high anxiety at school. When attendance difficulties are more established, research has shown that having an empathic trusted adult to talk issues through with is key to a successful reintegration.

- **Planned transition from primary to secondary school:** as highlighted before, a difficult transition to secondary education has been identified as a risk factor for EBSA, therefore a careful transition plan, particularly for children at higher risk of experiencing anxiety as explored in this guidance, is key to prevent EBSA. Therefore it is crucial that the feeder schools flag up any early separation difficulties or past EBSA issues, even if mild.
- **Anticipatory needs for wellbeing:** this approach means a proactive identification and fulfilment of needs (based on a comprehensive assessment of needs) to promote overall well-being before they become urgent or problematic. Don't wait until the crisis as a child or young person is at least capability to ask for help in a crisis. This could include strategies to manage stress, build resilience, and foster positive mental health. This might involve developing coping mechanisms, practicing mindfulness, and engaging in activities that contribute to emotional well-being.
- **Early identification** of the issues and a quick response to re-engaging with the child or young person. Research shows that early intervention can be key to positive outcomes, therefore it is important to identify EBSA and intervene as early as possible, ideally before a child completely stops attending school.
- **Positive relationships:** EBSA research points to positive relationships with both, peers and adults, as key to supporting children and young people experiencing EBSA. Enabling the development of positive supportive relationships with peers through activities the CYP enjoys and opportunities to engage in extra-curricular activities. It is crucial to facilitate environments where the young person can feel safe. For example, if the playground feels unsafe or overwhelming, provide alternatives where they can socialise with other young people without feeling anxious. Implementing a clear anti-bullying policy is key.
- **Identify the Underlying Causes:** Work closely with parents, teachers, and other professionals to identify the underlying causes of school refusal. Understanding the root causes is essential for developing effective strategies.
- **Implement a Gradual Return:** Gradually reintroduce the child to school in a phased manner. This could involve starting with shorter school days or allowing the child to attend specific classes or activities initially, while having a designated area in which to retreat if feeling under threat.
- **Personalised targeted flexible support:** A trusted adult who can negotiate the timetable and support a more flexible approach is key. It is very important that there is a coordinated approach between adults involved and that there are no 'surprises' or changes for the CYP in the day. The timetable has to be pre-agreed between the child, parents and school staff, with external agency support where needed. Schools staff should ALL be aware of the issues and how to deal with them.
- **Provide Mental Health Support to support manage anxiety:** Offer access to counselling services within the school or through external providers. A trained mental health worker such as MHST, ELSA, Place2Be or even a mentor can help the student

address underlying emotional issues and develop coping strategies. The focus should be on understanding the link between thoughts, feelings and behaviours, as well as psychoeducation on anxiety and stress response. This needs to be held by someone in the school, together with reasonable adjustments to be made by the school in addition to the counselling/mental health support sessions. For example, the counsellor and young person might agree on a communication system with teachers in class (e.g. using highlighter pens)

- **Effective collaboration and communication between school staff, family and external agencies.** Real collaboration means working with the CYP and their parents, as well as external agencies. This is based on the premise that the young person is not the problem holder but both the school and CYP have a problem which requires a 2-way approach: joint problem and solution, with the support of parents and external agencies.
- **Person-centered planning:** putting the child or young person’s views and wishes at the centre of any plans or decisions that matter to them (see example templates in Appendix X)
- **Working with the CYP to find what motivates them in school,** e.g. use a PATH

Commented [ED5]: Need to finish this sentence? Or just merge with point above - PATH is PCP?

Figure X:
Factors that support school attendance and successful reintegration into school

Commented [ED6]: We don't need to number each 'figure' unless re-referring to them later/earlier in the document?

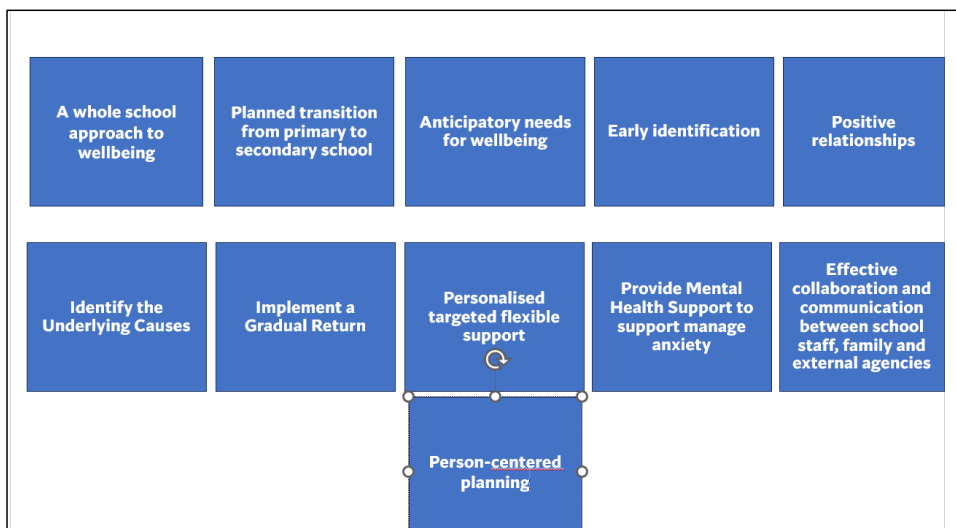
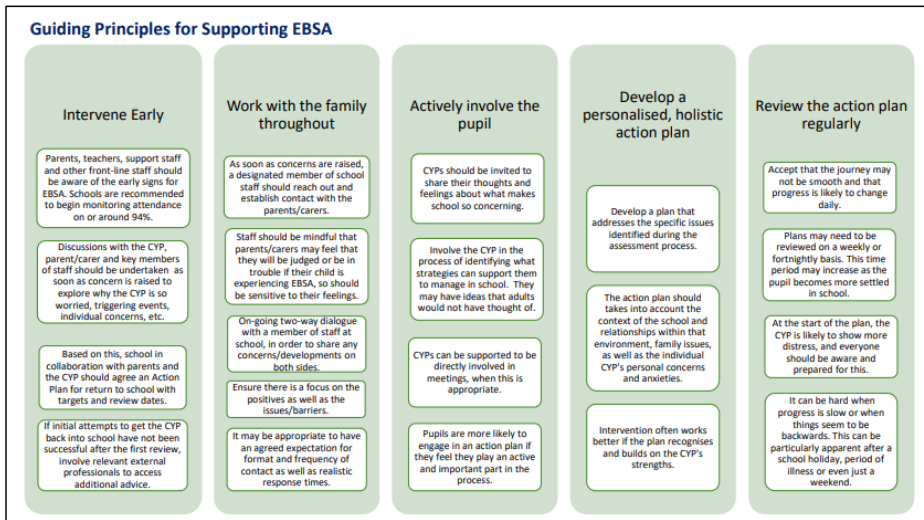


Figure X.

Guiding Principles for Supporting EBSA (taken from Hertfordshire EBSA guidance)



WHAT CAN SCHOOLS DO?

EBSA is a complex issue, however, research has shown that there are approaches and strategies at the universal and more targeted specialist level that can support children and young people experiencing EBSA as it will be explored next.

The attached 'pathway' is a good practice guide/process for schools to follow when they are thinking about young people's attendance and possible EBSA.

ADD HYPERLINK TO PATHWAY

UNIVERSAL

Whole school preventative approaches to EBSA support

The new government guidance on mental health issues affecting pupil's attendance ([Summary of responsibilities where a mental health issue is affecting attendance \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)) has set out some principles for supporting CYP, providing a

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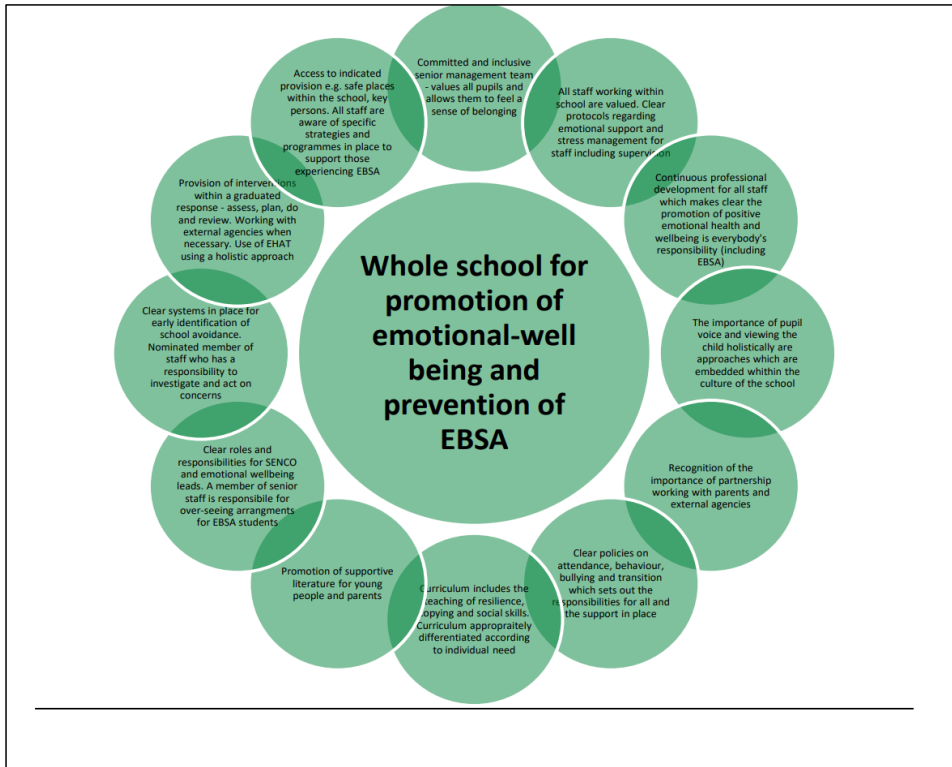
summary of responsibilities and recommendations for schools (including Local Authority involvement) where a MH issue is affecting attendance. It highlights the importance of schools working in collaboration with parents. It also states that a child with a SEND needs may be more anxious about attending school and under the Equality Act (2010), schools ought to ensure that they make reasonable adjustments to improve attendance of all children but particularly for CYP with SEND. Thus, when planning support for CYP with attendance difficulties, it is key to consider whether there are underlying SEND needs and/or MH difficulties.

Promoting mental health throughout the school benefits pupils, teaching staff, and families. It entails integrating the school community as a whole in the promotion and support of wellbeing. Positive and supportive communication with families is key to this endeavour. Educational staff can lessen the impact of EBSA risk factors by creating a supportive, safe and inclusive culture. The image below highlights some of the structure, culture and good practice that schools can adopt as a whole school approach. A whole school audit can identify what the school is already doing to promote pupil's wellbeing as well as what they could do to improve attendance and wellbeing (see Appendix X for examples of whole school audits)

Figure X.

Whole school approach from promotion of emotional wellbeing and prevention of EBSA (taken from Plymouth EPS guidance)

Commented [DEH8]: We need to link to one that we will promote in schools - do you have a favourite? Maybe liaise with the LAC/VS team and see what they are using?



The Anna Freud Centre's [5 Steps to Mental Health and Wellbeing](#) is an evidence-based free Framework to support school in developing whole school approaches to support mental health and wellbeing. There are also Whole School Audit Templates that can support school to identify and analyse factors in their school culture and ethos, as well as schools systems, policy and practice to promote emotional wellbeing and prevent EBSA (see for example [WSCC](#) and [Lancashire](#) councils and [5 School Wide Strategies To Support EBSA and Improve Attendance](#))

Policies for transition (as highlighted in figure above) require schools to take proactive preventative measure before children transition from primary to secondary school (see the [Anna Freud Centre resources to support the transition to secondary school](#)). As mentioned before, this will include the feeder school flagging any children who have experienced separation anxiety or and/or attendance difficulties in primary, as well as good communication with parents and children, where key information is provided before the CYP starts school.

The figure below is an example of a checklist of key information that schools should give to new students - particularly those more vulnerable to experiencing EBSA (*taken from Lancashire EPS guidance*).

Key information required	Practical supports
Travel to school – how will they get there →	Go through journey to school, practice this, identify any companions
Key people in school →	Give a simplified structure chart, provide photos, identify a key person
Environment →	Layout of school – Provide maps, give tours, quiz, colour code subjects to building areas
Structure of the day timetables, break and lunchtime systems →	Provide timetables, colour code these, break and lunchtime systems
Social time – supporting social interactions and those more vulnerable, bullying policies →	Identify how pupils will be supported to make new friendships, access to supported social activities
Academic demands – how lessons are structured. Homework →	Give information about how lessons are structured, homework expectations
Support systems in place – pastoral SEN support →	Set out how young people will be supported provide one-page profile
Equipment needed →	Provide checklist for each day

TARGETED SUPPORT: ASSESS PLAN DO REVIEW

EBSA is a continuum from occasional avoidance of certain lessons to complete and persistent non-attendance. When avoidance behaviours start to appear, it's critical to gather more information from the young person, parents, and school staff who are involved with them. It's also critical to implement techniques for support as soon as possible. A prompt intervention can effectively stop behaviour driven by anxiety from becoming ingrained and improve the child's outcomes significantly. Staff working in schools should follow a thorough assess, plan, do, review cycle, with the CYP at the centre of all interventions and planning.

Figure X.

Assess Plan Do Review EBSA cycle (taken from West Sussex EBSA guidance)



Each child experience of EBSA is unique and therefore will require a tailored approach to assessment, planning and intervention. However, there are some general guidelines on what constitutes good EBSA practice, as it will be explored next. Families, in particular parents and carers, should be actively involved in the reintegration process. Schools and professionals should aim to be supportive of parents, without blaming. This should include schools actively involving parents in the assess-plan-do-review (ADPR) cycle. The following guidelines have been compiled from research evidence, other LAs guidelines as well as courses from experts in this field.

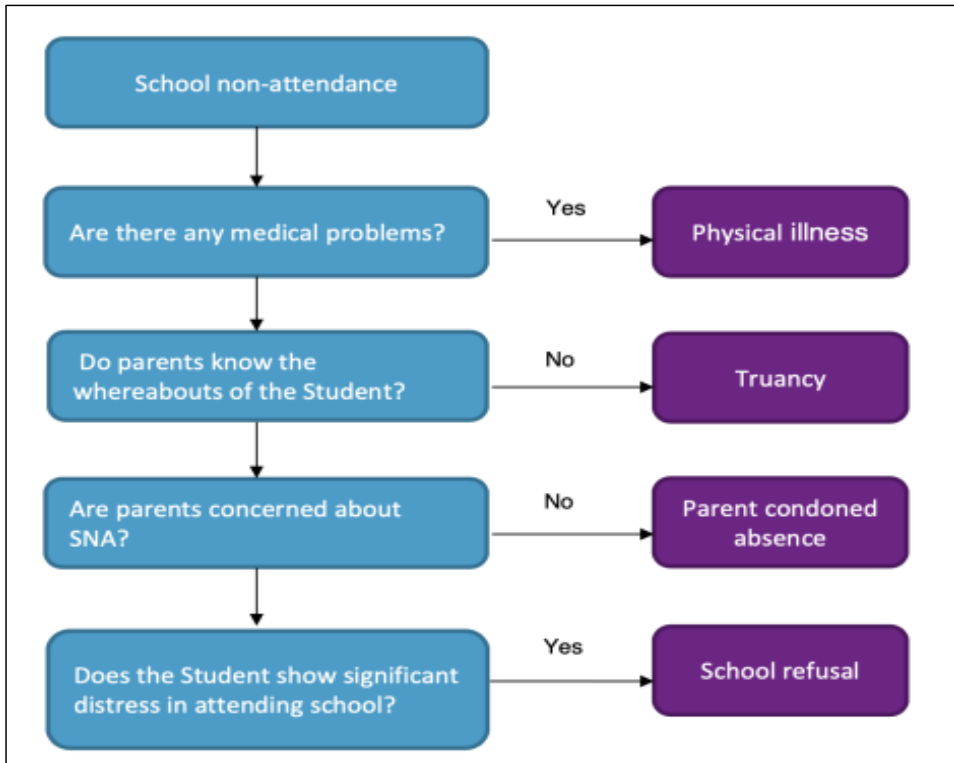
1. Assessing Children Experiencing EBSA

The first step to is to distinguish EBSA from other causes of persistent absence, such as truancy or physical illness. Thambirajah, Grandson and De Hayes (2008) devised a simple flow chart for this purpose:

Figure X.

Tambirajah et al.'s Flow Chart (taken from Tina Rae's talk on Understanding and supporting those with emotionally based school avoidance, 30.01.2023)

Commented [SCH9]: Redo figure to say EBSA and not school refusal



Once EBSA has been identified there should be a prompt investigation into the reasons for the difficulties. In order for any intervention or support plan to be successful it is essential to gain an understanding of the various aspects causing and maintaining the school avoidance behaviours.

Dr Jerricah Hodlder (an educational psychologist with expertise on this field) has developed some useful resources such as [the risk and resilience profiles](#) that provide a functional analysis of the significant risk factors that may be acting as a barrier to school attendance and the resilience factors which is where we can begin to mobilise change. Both risk and resilience factors consider aspects at the individual, family and school level based on research evidence. It is recommended that the people who knows the child best in both the school and home environments completes the questionnaire to get a view on those risk and resilience factors that act as strength and protective factors to wellbeing and attendance. Together these risk and resilience factors (which need to be considered together) will create a profile that can be analysed by school (with professional support where needed) and this information will inform the child's reintegration process.

As it has been outlined in this guidance, EBSA is a multifaceted complex phenomenon that requires a tailored approach that considers predisposing risk factors, as well as the precipitating factors (or triggering events) and maintaining factors at the child, family and school levels, as well as an analysis of strengths and protective factors. Thus, instead of a 'within child' model, professionals and schools need to consider the context in which the behaviour attendance difficulties started and plan accordingly a change to those, as well as targeting the anxiety triggering the avoidance behaviours. In cases where attendance difficulties are persistent and entrenched, the best way to reintegration is via skilled professionals working with school staff to provide an enhanced and quite intensive individual plan as it will be outlined next.

2. Planning support

Co-production of an individualised, flexible support plan between the child or young person, family and school is key. This support plan should include the views of parents and the voice of the child or young person at the centre of planning. A gradual return to school will be part of this plan. However, it is important that school considers not only attendance as the aim, but an increase in the child or young person's wellbeing. To elicit the child or young person's views and plan for a positive return to school the [Return to School Planning Tool](#) has helpful resources.

Parents and teachers (with the support of professionals where appropriate) will devise a comprehensive individualised education plan that clearly outlines the academic modifications (where applicable), accommodations (e.g. in terms of timetable), support available (e.g. for catching up with missed learning and for emotional support, including regular check-ins) and modifications based on the child's needs.

This plan will be based on a thorough assessment of risk and resilience factors, as mentioned above. Hence, for example, if the child's main anxiety relates to specific times of the day or places in school, the plan should reflect strategies to support in those areas. Adults supporting the child (in consideration of their developmental stage) should work with them when creating this plan.

The support plan should include:

- Daily check-in sessions for the child or young person with a person they trust at school.
- A communication system for the child or young person to be able to communicate how they are feeling (e.g. a traffic light system).
- A designated a quiet and comfortable space within the school where they can retreat if feeling overwhelmed.
- Individualised support for catching up with missed learning

- Scheduled regular counselling/ELSA sessions (once per week) to manage anxiety and build coping strategies.
- Support for transitions, particularly those that can trigger anxiety (e.g. corridors between lessons or lunchtimes). This could include reasonable adjustments such as allowing the young person (if age appropriate) to arrive to lesson later and/or leave earlier to avoid crowds.

Person-centered planning, which puts the wishes of CYPs at the centre, is key to a successful reintegration. As well as listening to CYP's views, adults should aim to empower them to voice their opinions and communicate her views and feelings. This should include an adult working with them to find alternative ways for CYP experiencing anxiety to communicate their feelings (i.e. a traffic light system where different coloured highlighters communicate different feelings). This can be an integral part of feeling safe in school. Coordination and cooperation between school staff is also key, so that there is consistency in the support provided, increasing childrens' psychological safety.

In more persistent and entrenched EBSA cases, where the CYP has stopped attending school, a gradual school reintegration plan should be devised, beginning with short positive school visits and building the time s/he spends in school. This could initially consist of non-academic hours to familiarise themselves with the environment, although they may prefer to start with lessons. Then according to progress, the plan could gradually increase exposure by attending less intimidating school events or classes with a support person.

A review date (usually every two weeks to begin with) should be set at the initial planning meeting.

3. Do: implementation of the support plan

The EBSA support plan should be communicated to ALL adults that the child or young person might come in contact with at school. No unexpected changes to the plan should be made without the parents and/or CYP's knowledge and agreement as this is likely to increase the CYP's anxiety and set back progress made.

Although the reintegration plan should be a concerted effort and not the sole responsibility of one staff member, it important that one or two people in the school are named as responsible for coordinating CYP support. This could be the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo-where the CYP has SEN), the Mental Health Lead in the school, Head of Year or the school nurse.

Setting clear communication systems between home and school is key to plan implementation and monitoring the implementation and effectiveness of the strategies, ensuring that there is good communication with parents/carers about CYP's progress.

4. Reviewing progress

At this stage, progress should be reviewed, and the plan adjusted accordingly, setting next steps. Monitoring of progress should be done collaboratively by schools with parents and children, in consultation with other agencies where needed (i.e. for entrenched EBSA cases).

There is no set timing for this, but it is good progress to plan for small steps with regular reviews (i.e. weekly or every two weeks) and when the CYP start showing progress, this could be spaced out to every four to six weeks.

Gathering children's views

Research shows that considering children's views should be at the centre of any successful EBSA reintegration plan. This should be an integral part of the graduated approach described above (assess-plan-do-review cycle).

Gathering student's voice on mental health difficulties and experiences that are affecting their wellbeing should be at the centre of a whole school approach to supporting CYP's mental health and EBSA prevention (see the [Children's Society Guide](#) to supporting wellbeing and on how to empower and involve students - including those with SEN and communication difficulties - in developing a whole school approach to wellbeing).

Adults may use person-centered tools such as [Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope \(P.A.T.H\)](#) or [The Ideal School](#) when gathering CYP's views and planning support with them (see also [Appendix X for examples of child-centered support plans](#)). Other tools such as the [School Wellbeing Cards](#) (video tutorial on link) is helpful in identifying the risk and resilience factors, while **Mapping the Landscape of your School** (Ripley, 2015) to identify the anxiety triggers in the social, physical and learning school environment.

Your educational psychologist can help you with the use and application of these tools.

CASE STUDIES

Primary case study

Johnny's (pseudonym) attendance difficulties had an early onset throughout primary school years (related to separation anxiety) but got worse during the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence attendance difficulties preceded his persistent and severe non-attendance in year 4. Johnny's attendance difficulties were compounded by multiple factors at the individual, family and school level including academic difficulties, unidentified social communication needs, parental separation and difficulties in the relationship with his class teacher. He received an autism diagnosis when he was in year 4.

Commented [BHH10]: I've put a template for a 'life path' (which I used for my thesis research) in the folder - I use it quite often with CYP so we can map out their school/life experiences over time. Have written a brief blurb about it.

Commented [BHH11R10]: I might actually try and turn it into a nicer resource rather than it just being a boring word doc - if I do, I will email over to you 😊 (planning on spending some of my new found free time making nice resources!)

During year 3, school provided Johnny with sessions with the school's Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA), which resulted in positive outcomes. The ELSA (with EP support) supported the class team to understand Johnny's needs and made regular time to check in with him. His teacher implemented emotional regulation strategies suggested by the ELSA, with a restorative approach and well differentiated learning. However, Johnny's pattern of attendance began to deteriorate again at the beginning of year 4 as he did not have a good relationships with his class teacher. This pattern of attendance difficulties started with lateness in the mornings and deteriorated further to less than 50% attendance. Johnny's sleep pattern also deteriorated, and he was increasingly unable to get up in the mornings to come to school due to poor sleep. He was not able to get up, dress independently, nor to feed himself. He worried about others' perceptions of his non-attendance, academic difficulties, lack of academic confidence and peer related difficulties, as well as specific anxieties about school (spellings and swimming) and lack of connection with his class teacher and TA, which made Johnny feel unsafe at school.

School sought Educational Psychologist Involvement from the council, as well as support from a specialist autism teacher in January, when Johnny was no longer coming into school. The two professionals worked together with school staff (including the SENCo and ELSA) as well as Johnny's mother to conduct a thorough assessment of Johnny's risk and resilience factors using the EBSA risk and resilience scales. The ELSA worked with Johnny to gather his views about things at school that were worrying him so his views could be included to his support plan. A gradual reintegration plan with clear outcomes and strategies was co-constructed and a date set for review. Strategies included coming to school to do ELSA sessions only, but including the year 4 teaching assistant, so that Johnny could begin to develop a trusting relationship with another person at school. At the same time there was CAMHS involvement to support Johnny's sleep and participation in a group intervention for children who are experiencing EBSA.

The autism specialist teacher worked with school staff on autism awareness and understanding autism needs. Professionals kept reviewing the plan every six weeks with school and parents to monitor progress, discuss the success of the implementation of strategies as well as to adjust where necessary and agree on next steps. By the Summer term in year 4, Johnny had made a significant improvement in his attendance, sleep and wellbeing. There was also an improvement in his self-help skills. He was on a reduced timetable (included attending most days except Fridays), as well as participating in two after school clubs. He had developed a close relationship with his classroom's TA and continued to do ELSA sessions, focusing on developing strategies to support his mental health and wellbeing, such as breathing exercises. At the end of year 4, transition support plan for year 5 was co-constructed. Regular assess-plan-do-review meetings between Johnny's mother, school staff and professional involved continued for over a year.

Secondary case study

Emma (pseudonym) found it difficult to engage with school from the beginning of year 7, when she transitioned to an all-girls school where she struggled to make friends. She had

been through primary school with her twin brother, and this was the first time they had been apart at school. Emma's pattern of attendance difficulties began by her being late for school most days, even though she was a rule follower. Her school reportedly did not offer support for her attendance issues, even though Emma had a diagnosis of Developmental Coordination Disorder. In year 8 Emma's lateness worsened, as did her difficulty engaging with school, so her mother decided to enrol her in her brother's large comprehensive school towards the end of year 9. Here she initially thrived: she finally seemed to be happy and making friends. She was engaged academically and was even playing in the orchestra. However in year 10 things worsened again in terms of attendance and wellbeing: Emma started to be late and to fall asleep before and during school. Her mental health began to deteriorate again, and she experienced panic attacks.

After an incident where Emma lost consciousness in school and was rushed into hospital, her attendance stopped completely (during the autumn term of year 10). Emma's mother managed to get an appointment with a neurologist who recognised all that Emma had been through and sped up the medical investigations for her sleep problems (for which no physiological cause was found). Emma was diagnosed with autism. Her unidentified needs were perceived as a major factor in her emotional difficulties (as she had to mask her difficulties at school) and a contributing factor for non-attendance. Academic pressure was also a contributing factor: GCSEs and mocks were coming up, and the transition to a new school at the critical time of choosing GCSEs had been more difficult than Emma and her mother had initially realised. After two months of complete non-attendance, Emma's mother was contacted by an attendance officer from the school. They started a reintegration plan with school and things began to improve slowly.

Emma's support plan was intensive and extensive and included a coordinated effort between the school's SENCo, Emma's mother and an educational psychologist working directly with Emma applying a cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) approach. The school offered a flexible, personalised and coordinated approach, but also professionals such as the EP offered a gradual reintroduction and desensitisation approach, which through "trial and error", supported a gradual reintegration into school, empowered Emma and promoted her wellbeing.

The CBT sessions began near the school's reception where Emma and the EP would sit in an empty classroom and included some psychoeducational work that helped Emma to understand her anxiety and its expression in her body, identify her triggers, challenge unhelpful thoughts and complete a graduated exposure approach. The sessions gradually moved towards the SEN suite, and later on to empty classes, according to Emma's comfort levels. There was no expectation from anyone (professional or school) that she should return to school immediately, so she didn't feel rushed.

To address Emma's intense anxiety and freezing responses, the EP devised innovative techniques where she could draw (nobody was to ask her any questions at that point) and a communication system where she could let teachers know how she was feeling using highlighters of different colours. In parallel, Emma's mother and SENCo had regular review meeting where they would devise a plan, review and change it accordingly. For example, at

the beginning it was thought that Emma should come for one subject, which was later changed to come and see a few people and just stay for lunch in the SEN suite.

School was very flexible, adapting according to Emma's progress, putting in place many adjustments such arriving later to lessons and leaving earlier, having lunch and playtime in the SEN suite, and not having to do PE with everyone else. Supportive school staff was essential to her reintegration plan: Emma had support in most lessons from different adults (learning support assistants) who had an expertise in that particular subject. She was greeted by one of them at the beginning of the school day (where she would arrive slightly later to avoid the crowds, being dropped off by her mother) and they would accompany her in lessons or teach her in the SEN suite, when Emma did not feel that she could be in the classroom.

Emma was a good student and was motivated to continue her studies. This coordinated effort between home-school supported by external professionals across a whole academic year, resulted in a significant improvement in her attendance and subsequently she was able to set her GCSEs in year 11 and progress towards sixth form education. Emma's mother also applied to an EHCP which was issued in the middle of this reintegration process.

Commented [SCH12]: Probably you don't want me to say this but I think it is important for precedent in similar cases where CYP are not being issued EHCPs? At least, that is my opinion

Commented [ED13R12]: It rather depends on local arrangements - are we going to provide resources for this outside of EHCPs (especially where there isn't a substantial and long term learning need)? If we are, then there is no need for an EHCP.

Commented [ED14R12]: I don't think just saying 'EHCP' with no context as to what it provided and the impact it had is useful? Too many professionals and parents think it is the answer - when we know that isn't necessarily true. However - this is a case study, so is a factual reflection - maybe add that it 'allowed the school to be flexible in applying resources to support Emma' ?

FURTHER RESOURCES

Features of effective intervention



Effective EBSA Intervention

What Does the Research Say?



Intervene Early and Quickly



Once a CYP has been identified as experiencing EBSA, intervene quickly to address barriers to school attendance and wellbeing. Schools and families should not wait until a CYP shows excessive distress, or a complete school withdrawal.

Return to School at Earliest Opportunity



Try to maintain connection and belonging during periods of absence, planning for a return to school at the earliest opportunity. Whilst some time away from school can provide respite and recovery, the return to school can often feel even more daunting after a period of absence.

Capturing the Voice of the CYP



There should be a strong focus on the CYP's voice and developing a shared understanding of the EBSA - this allows those around the CYP to better understand the CYP's needs and to ensure that the CYP's voice is at the heart of any return to school plans.

Match Support to Need



Support plans should be matched to identified strengths and needs. When intervention does not work, it is often because the drivers of a child's EBSA have not been properly understood and so there is a mismatch with support offered.

Close Home School Liaison



Parents and carers have a wealth of information on their child's needs and so offer expertise when producing a bespoke plan for supporting their CYP's return to school.

Strength and Protective Factors



Harnessing and building on strength and protective factors can be vital in supporting CYP to increase their resilience to maintain their attendance. Equal attention should be given to risk and protective factors.



Commented [BHH15]: Perhaps we can adapt this and create an intervention 'checklist' or prompt sheet for schools?

Strategies that are likely to apply to all CYPs with EBSA

Different effective practice examples for supporting CYP experiencing EBSA for different reasons, can be found in the new government guidance [Support for pupils where a mental health issue is affecting attendance: effective practice examples \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#). The [Anna Freud Centre](#) also has good practice EBSA case study examples. The EBSA horizons website (by DR Jerricah Holder) also provides a [strategy bank](#).

Developing a person-centred plan for EBSA support: and monitoring and reviewing the plan regularly in collaboration with the CYP, parents and external agencies where applicable.

Enabling pupils' voice. Give example of highlighters.

Motivational interviewing for EBSA cases.

Add a couple of resources for accessing pupil's voice. if this is not working, refer to your EP for further suggestions. [Maybe link to Hannah's folder?](#)

“Soft start”: access to a daily routine at school that starts with calming activities that ease him into the school day. As much as possible, providing predictable routines in school to help create a sense of security and reduce his anxiety associated with uncertainty. This could involve starting off the day by reviewing the child's timetable and identifying any particular worries they may have.

When should a school involve external professionals such as Educational Psychologists (EPs)?

EPS can support with consultation, training, assessment and intervention levels. As already mentioned, providing targeted support as early as possible will prevent from the attendance difficulties to becoming entrenched and more difficult to effect change.

Commented [BHH16]: I've added some example templates into an appendix

Commented [BHH17R16]: There are also some nice 'return to school' questionnaires (one for younger and one for older children) I've saved in PES - from West Sussex

Commented [SCH18]: Not sure if applicable is the right but should be provide a bit more guidance as to who and when to involve or that will be in the pathway so we could signpost to that in this section? Or shall I start a new section below on EP and other's involvement? (see below)

REFERENCES

Thambirajah M,S., Grandison K.J., and De-Hayes L. (2008) Understanding School refusal: a handbook for professionals in Education, Health and Social Care.

Solihull Community Educational Psychology Service & Solar (2020): Collaborative working to promote attendance and Psychological wellbeing.

Rae, T. (2020). Understanding & Supporting Children & Young People with Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA). Hinton House Publishers.

APPENDICES

Appendix : person centred plan template:

Could we adapt this one from Havering?

APPENDIX 5. PUPIL SUPPORT PLAN TEMPLATE

SUPPORT PLAN FOR _____	
Date we made the plan:	Date for review:
At school, these things can make me feel upset:	
When I start to get upset, I / others might notice these things about me:	
My key adult(s) in school is / are:	
When can I speak with my key adults?	Where can I speak with my key adult (s)?
Places in school I can go to where I feel safe and supported:	I can go to my safe spaces at/when:

Until _____, my return to school plan includes the following changes to my attendance: <small>Identify any changes to days or time the pupil comes in.</small>		
Changes to my school day include: <small>Identify any changes to the timetable, routine (break, lunch times, changes between lessons etc.), classroom expectations (not expected to read aloud, work in pairs etc.) or homework.</small>		
Things I can do to make myself feel better when I'm at school.	Things that other people (staff and friends) can do to help me feel better when I'm at school.	Things that my family can do to support me to attend school.
This plan was agreed by:		
(my signature)	(my key adult's signature)	(my parent/carer's signature)
Other people who will know about this plan are:		

Notes from Hannah

(see also resources saved down in PES – ‘resources to include with guidance doc’)

Mapping the landscape resources – physical, learning and social environment

There are some really nice resources from Lancashire which look at different aspects of the school environment and how much each causes anxiety (primary and secondary version): [lancashire-ebbsa-guidance-strategy-toolkit-2023-update.pdf](https://www.lancashire-ebbsa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/lancashire-ebbsa-guidance-strategy-toolkit-2023-update.pdf) (pages 28-40).

School wellbeing cards: [School Wellbeing Risk and Resilience Card Set \(schoolwellbeingcards.co.uk\)](https://www.schoolwellbeingcards.co.uk/)

Commented [BHH19]: Havering's guidance has a nice way to present/list resources – see pg 24 onwards [Havering EBBSA Guidance Toolkit \(September 2023\).pdf](https://www.havering.gov.uk/media/10122/havering-ebbsa-guidance-toolkit-september-2023.pdf)

Commented [BHH20R19]: And Bracknell Forest have a nice infographic too [EBBSA Resource Infographic \(2\).pdf](https://www.bracknell-forest.gov.uk/media/10122/ebbsa-resource-infographic-2.pdf)



Through a card sorting activity children and young people are empowered to share their experiences of school/college and thus provide invaluable insight into the strengths and barriers that children encounter in their educational attendance and wellbeing.

PATH – I'm sure someone has a nice summary we can use!