Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA):

guidance for Schools and Educational Settings

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**introduction**

Hammersmith and Fulham Educational Psychology Service (EPS) has developed this document in response to the increased numbers of children and young people who are experiencing difficulties with school attendance. Our most recent IDAMS data, from May 2024, indicated around 400 young people across the borough had missed at least 50% of school time so far this year. Though EBSA is not coded in attendance data, survey information from schools would indicate that well over 200 of these cases have an emotional underpinning.

The document has been written to share research evidence and provide guidance for schools in assessing, understanding and meeting the needs of young people experiencing EBSA. It is to be read and used alongside the ***EBSA Multi-Agency Support Pathway*** [LBHF EBSA Multiagency Pathway (004).docx](https://officesharedservice.sharepoint.com/:w:/r/sites/hfs/chssen/SENDDev/EP-SHARED/PES/PES/B.%20EP%20FOLDERS/Erik/2022-23/EBSA/LBHF%20EBSA%20Multiagency%20Pathway%20(004).docx?d=wc93dcbf1288541b3a9cf4743a7601044&csf=1&web=1&e=yk2OSx)and the resources contained within the ***Learning Partnership EBSA webpage***: [Emotionally Based School Avoidance Guidance and Resources for Schools - Learning Partnership (lbhflearningpartnership.com)](https://lbhflearningpartnership.com/curriculum_hub/emotionally-based-school-avoidance-guidance-and-resources-for-schools/)

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. 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

The guidance and pathway documents highlight the importance of early identification and timely support, so that pupils most at risk of non-attendance can have their needs met at an early stage before the problem escalates. It also includes practical guidance and useful resources for professionals to support young people in feeling confident and secure at school, which has been shown to be important in the prevention of non-attendance behaviour.

What is EBSA?

Emotionally Based-School Avoidance (EBSA) is a widely used term to describe 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.

Whilst terminology varies across published literature, 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. The term EBSA is used instead of terms like ‘school-refusal’ to acknowledge that the behaviour (avoidance) has an emotional root (often anxiety), and that the young person often doesn’t feel that they have control over the situation hence it is NOT an active choice from the child not to attend.

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 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**

This image highlights how EBSA occurs along a continuum of need which includes those who are showing the early signs, as described above, and those at risk of becoming persistent non-attenders.

Occasional avoidance

Intermittent avoidance

Frequent

avoidance

Complete

avoidance

Adapted from: Thambirajah et al (2008)

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.

**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 children 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. 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). 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 child does not want to come to school
* child 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 child to attend school
* Identifiable patterns of within school non-attendance e.g. specific days, subjects, staff members
* Providing minor reasons for school absences
* Child experiences anxiety in relation to home factors e.g. parental separation, divorce, conflict, loss, bereavement
* Child displays greater reliance upon family members e.g. separation anxiety, seeking more closeness.
* Concerns around academic progress due to school non-attendance/missed education
* Child 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.

**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 expect all 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, the majority of children are able to tolerate and overcome this anxiety (possibly with some temporary support) and that it would not be expected to impact their ability to take part in school, 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. **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.

A screenshot of a computer

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*EBSA Anxiety cycle (WSCC EBSA guidance*

**‘Functions’ 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 and what feelings this behaviour is communicating. Research has identified four common ‘functions’ of EBSA that underpin the difficulties with attending school, shown in the image below. Children experiencing EBSA may 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.

A diagram of functions of ebsa

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The following questions are helpful to ask when a child shows early signs of EBSA:

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

**Risk and Resilience Factors**

Research suggests the following place children at greater **risk** of EBSA. An awareness of these factors can help early identification of these young people so that support can be given at an early stage:

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

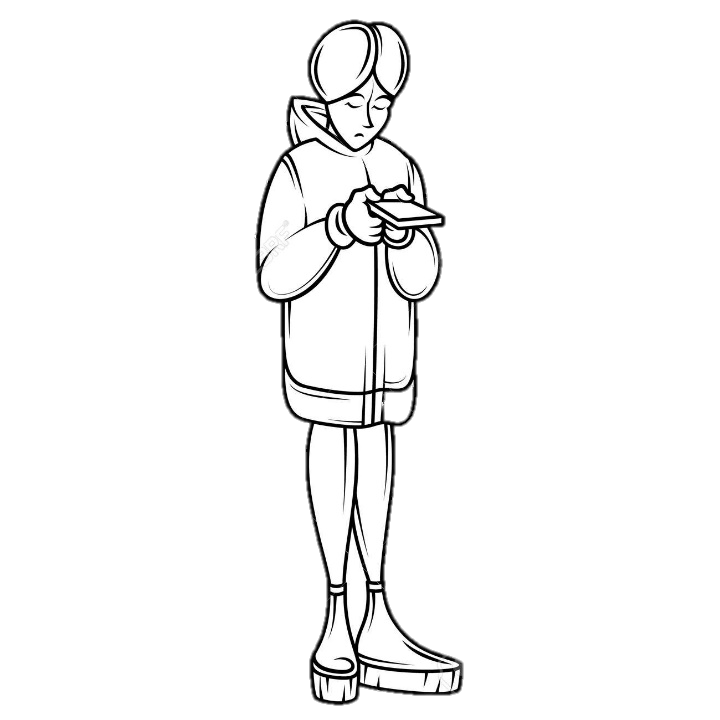
*Taken from West Sussex EPS (2022), Brent & Camden*

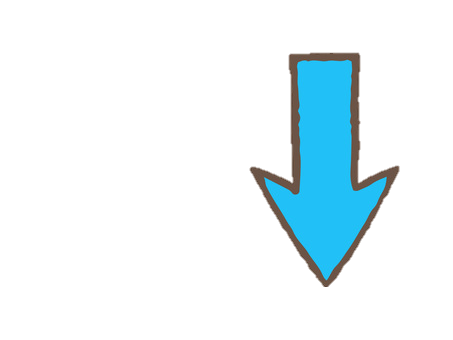
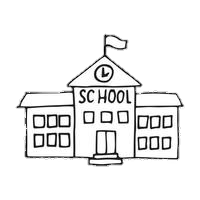
Areas of **strength and resilience** within the child, their family and school, should be identified so that they can be sustained and built upon to support the child to attend school and reduce their feelings of anxiety. These may include:

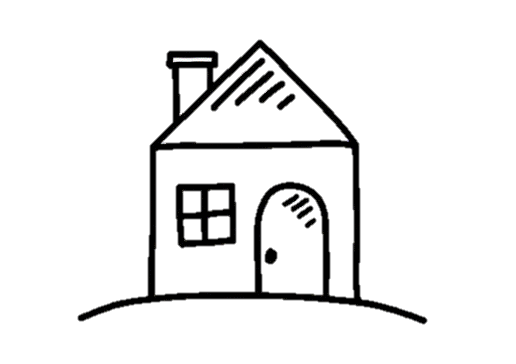
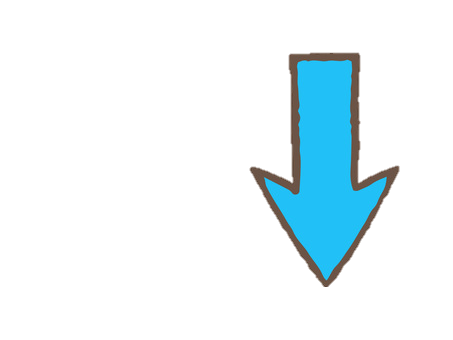
* Developing ambition, aspiration and motivation
* Increasing confidence, self-esteem, self-efficacy, value in themselves
* Developing feelings of safety, security and a sense of belonging
* Having positive experiences where they can succeed
* Holding positive relationships with peers or staff
* Feeling 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’a child out of home, ‘pull’ them into school, ‘push’ them away from school or ‘pull ‘them back towards their home.

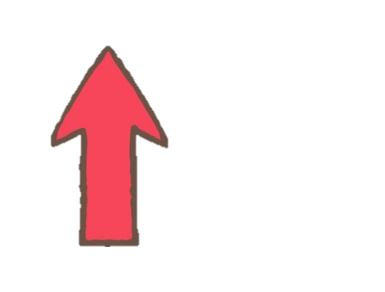


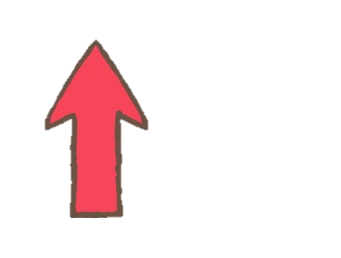




**PULL**

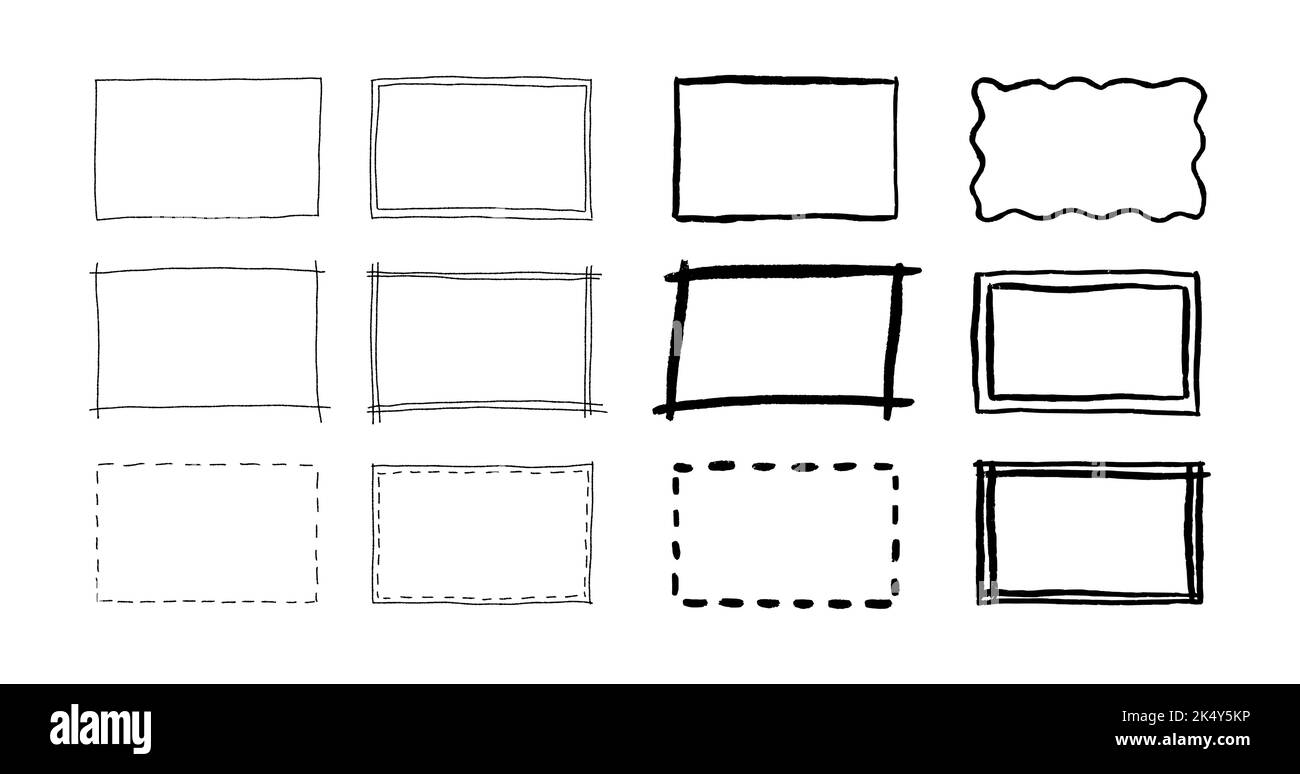
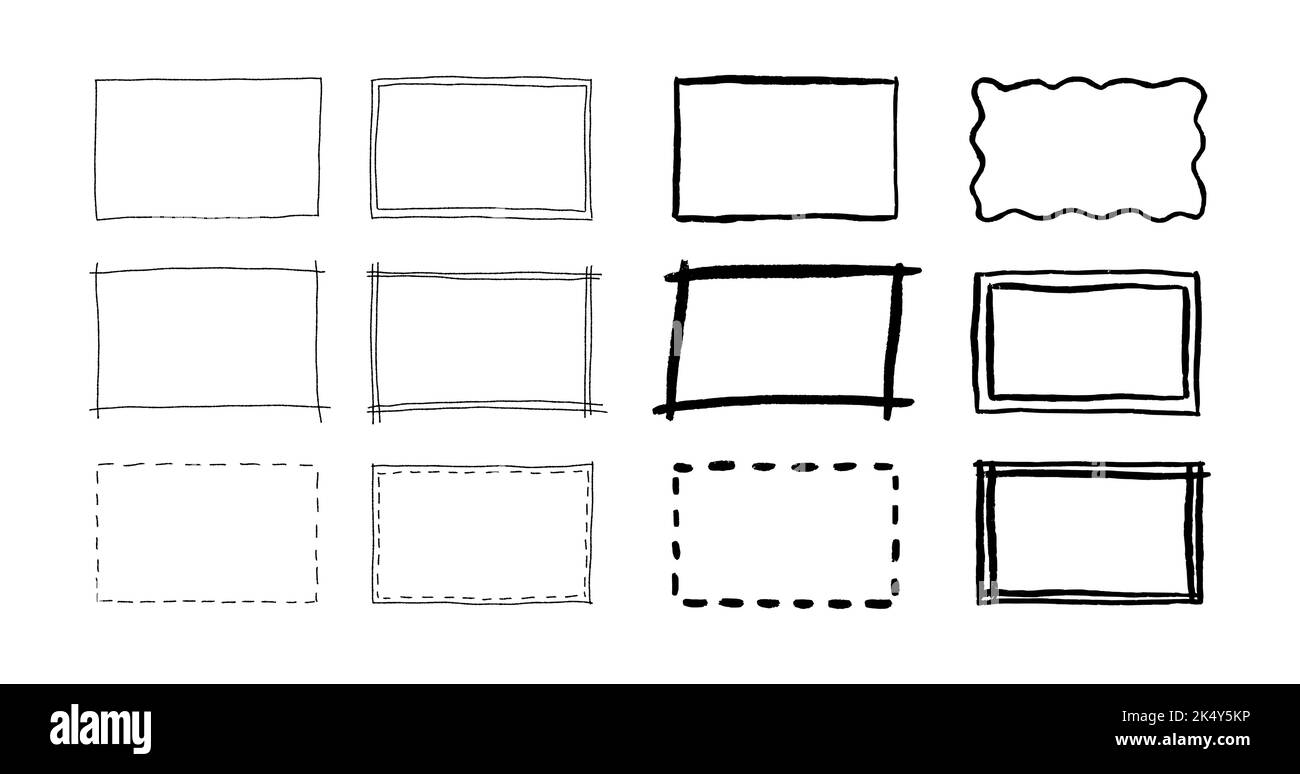
**PUSH**





**PUSH**

**PULL**



**Pull towards home**

**Push from school**

* Difficulties accessing learning
* Feeling overwhelmed by environmental/sensory aspects of school
* Frequent behaviour points
* Friendship difficulties
* Feeling that no one in school understands them
* Recent parental separation
* Worries about being away from parent
* Gets opportunity to pursue interests and hobbies at home

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 we can provide support and interventions to tip the scales and re-dress the balance and increase or create factors that pull them towards attending school.

**Local young people who we spoke with in Hammersmith and Fulham echoed what is known from existing research– the key themes they raised were**:

**The relationships with staff and peers.**

Good relationships with tutors in form time and friendships helped, whereas worries about friendship and negative pupil-staff interactions impacted their willingness to attend.

**Feeling listened to and empowered.**

Empowering students, by fostering their competence and autonomy in decisions that matter to them, is key. The students we spoke to valued adults who listened to them and supported them in becoming autonomous and independent. They felt that it was important to have a degree of control over what they do and felt that this autonomy could be expressed in environments such as their school council.

**Behaviour policies**

Young people thought that school behaviour policies can be harsh and were cited as being mistakenly applied to pupil’s whose needs had not been understood. Students felt that it was important that positive behaviour was celebrated in school.

**Transitions**

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. Key factors need to be identified to reduce the risk of EBSA occurring (see page 15 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 resulting in higher levels of school avoidance and persistent absenteeism, particularly in children with autism. 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.  *(with thanks to Dr Mollie Higgins)*

A diagram of a school

Description automatically generated with medium confidence

Unpick the factors contributing to SEND/autistic children’s 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.

When gathering autistic children’s views:

* Use visual tools (e.g. *Mapping the Landscape of your School*, The *School Wellbeing Cards*, the *Ideal School)* to support autistic young people 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).
* Seek advice from professionals such as EPs and autism specialist teachers.
* Be proactive and seek support early putting the right support in a timely manner to avoid attendance issues from becoming entrenched.

*It is important to remember that some children will not be diagnosed with autism until well into their secondary school years (or later as adults). Schools need to be aware of the social communication and sensory differences that may be indicative of autism in children without diagnoses. Many children experiencing EBSA may have undiagnosed needs.*

The new government guidance on mental health issues affecting pupil’s attendance 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 those 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.

Key considerations for schools

Research has pointed out key preventative factors for school avoidance and for supporting successful reintegration into school

*For prevention and early intervention:*

* **A whole school approach to wellbeing that promotes a sense of belonging:** create a school environment that is welcoming, inclusive and supportive environment. 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 reduce overall 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 highlightedbefore, 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. Secondary schools can also proactively ask about this. The same applies for children transitioning at other times in their schools’ journeys, including ‘in year’ moves.
* **Anticipating 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 needs they become urgent or problematic. Remembering young people are least capable to ask for help in a crisis. This could include strategies to manage stress, build resilience, and foster positive mental health. For example, developing coping mechanisms, practicing mindfulness, and engaging in activities that contribute to emotional well-being.

*For support when signs of EBSA have been identified:*

* **Early identification** of the issues and a quick response to re-engaging with the child or young person. Research shows this is 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 young person enjoys and supportive opportunities to engage in enjoyable extra-curricular activities. It is crucial to facilitate environments where the young person can feel safe. For example, if the playground feels overwhelming, provide alternative environments where they can socialise. Implementing an anti-bullying policy is key.
* **Identify the Underlying Causes or ‘functions’**: Work closely with parents, teachers, and other professionals to identify the functions EBSA so that appropriate support can be planned – the section on ‘functions’ in this document will help.
* **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.
* **Having a trusted adult as a coordinator, advocate and key point of contact for the child and family.** A trusted adult who can negotiate the timetable and support a more flexible approach is key. It will be important that children know who will greet them when they arrive, where they should go, and what they should do if they have worries or questions. This ‘safety net’ will make being at school feel less daunting.
* **Personalised targeted flexible support:** Offer support tailored to individual needs, making reasonable adjustments to enable a return to school in a gradual process of reintegration.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 this support plan.
* **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. A key adult at school must coordinate and link in with this professional, 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) which school staff will be responsible for communicating to teachers.
* **Effective collaboration and communication between school staff, family and external agencies.** EBSA requires joint problem solving with the child, with the support of parents and external agencies.
* **Person-centred planning**: putting the child or young person’s views and wishes at the centre of any plans or decisions that matter to them. Person-centred planning tools can be a useful visual resources to co-produce a plan, giving young people control over their social and learning environment by offering them choices and autonomy in decision making (see examples of person-centered planning such as the PATH in the ‘Person-centred planning’ resource section).

HOW should SCHOOLS do THIS?

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

[LBHF EBSA Multiagency Pathway (002).docx](https://officesharedservice.sharepoint.com/:w:/r/sites/hfs/chssen/SENDDev/EP-SHARED/PES/PES/B.%20EP%20FOLDERS/Erik/2022-23/EBSA/LBHF%20EBSA%20Multiagency%20Pathway%20(002).docx?d=wb30af7e16ebd4765b54a1b4879be54cf&csf=1&web=1&e=uTZgdW)

Universal / Preventative approaches

**Whole school preventative approaches to EBSA support**

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 whole school audit](https://officesharedservice.sharepoint.com/sites/hfs/chssen/SENDDev/EP-SHARED/PES/PES/J.%20USEFUL%20RESOURCES/EBSA/Admin/guidance%20working%20document/Resources%20to%20include%20with%20guidance%20doc/School-Self-Audit-EBSA.docx))

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)](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1136965/Summary_of_responsibilities_where_a_mental_health_issue_is_affecting_attendance.pdf) has set out some principles for supporting young people, providing a summary of responsibilities and recommendations for schools (including Local Authority involvement) where mental health is affecting attendance.

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

A diagram of a circle with green circles

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The Anna Freud Centre’s [5 Steps to Mental Health and Wellbeing](https://www.annafreud.org/resources/schools-and-colleges/5-steps/) 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](https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fwestsussex-local-offer.s3.amazonaws.com%2Fpublic%2Fsystem%2Fattachments%2F1124%2Foriginal%2FEBSA_Guidance_-Whole_School_Audit.docx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK) and [Lancashire](https://www.lancashire.gov.uk/media/930428/lancashire-ebsa-guidance-strategy-toolkit-2023-update.pdf) councils and [5 School Wide Strategies To Support EBSA and Improve Attendance](https://www.edpsyched.co.uk/blog/school-strategies-support-ebsa-improve-attendance#:~:text=How%20to%20Start%3A%201%20Implement%20school-wide%20programs%20or,afraid%20of%20individual%20accommodations%20based%20on%20need.%20))

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](https://www.annafreud.org/resources/schools-and-colleges/moving-up-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).*

A table with text and arrows

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Targeted Support when EBSA has become persistent

When avoidance behaviours start to appear and significant risks of EBSA are identified, 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 nonattendance 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 child at the centre of all interventions and planning to support ‘reintegration’ back into school

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

A diagram of a diagram

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Families, in particular parents and carers, should be encouraged by school to be actively involved in the school reintegration process as part of the assess-plan-do-review (ADPR) cycle. Schools and professionals should aim to be supportive of parents/carers, using language that avoids blame.

1. **Assessing Children Experiencing EBSA**

Once EBSA has been identified (and other factors for this, such as a medical conditions, are ruled out) 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.

Useful resources such as [the risk and resilience profiles](https://www.edpsyched.co.uk/ebsa-schools-resources) can be used by the people who know the child best in both the school and home environments. Together the risk and resilience factors (which need to be considered together) will create a profile that can be analysed by school staff (with professional support where needed) and this information will inform the child’s reintegration plan.

EBSA is a complex phenomenon that requires consideration of risk factors, what events have triggered EBSA and what factors are keeping it going (also known as predisposing, precipitating and maintaining factors). As well as a focus on the young person, staff should consider the context in which the behaviour attendance difficulties started and make any necessary contextual, social or environmental changes.

In cases where attendance difficulties are persistent and entrenched, the most successful reintegration programmes often involve professionals working with school staff to provide an enhanced and quite intensive individual plan, as will be outlined next.

1. **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](https://schools.westsussex.gov.uk/Page/17995) 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 could include:

* “Soft start”: access to a daily routine at school that starts with calming activities that

ease young people 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. It will be important that staff and the young person are aware of who will greet the child when they arrive and support with the soft start, and what arrangements will be in place to ensure the planned soft start happensshould the child arrive later than expected.

* Daily check-in sessions for the young person with an adult they trust at school.
* A communication system for the child or young person to be able to communicate how they are feeling that they young person understands and feels comfortable using (e.g. a traffic light system).
* A designated a quiet and comfortable space within the school where they can retreat if feeling overwhelmed and an agreed process for accessing this space, that all staff are aware of,
* Individualised support for catching up with missed learning
* Scheduled regular pastoral support sessions such as counselling/ELSA (once per week) to manage anxiety, build self-esteem and learn and practise 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.

In persistent and entrenched EBSA cases, where the young person has stopped attending school, a gradual school reintegration plan should be devised by key staff, 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, as the structure may feel safer. 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.

1. **Do: implementation of the support plan**

Different effective practice examples for supporting young people 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)](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1134196/Support_for_pupils_where_a_mental_health_issue_is_affecting_attendance_effective_practice_examples.pdf).The [Anna Freud Centre](https://d1uw1dikibnh8j.cloudfront.net/media/18945/addressing-emotionally-based-school-avoidance-rebrand.pdf) also has good practice EBSA case study examples. The EBSA horizons website (by Dr Jerricah Holder) also provides a [strategy bank](https://www.edpsyched.co.uk/strategy-bank-ebsa).

The EBSA support plan should be communicated to ALL adults that the child or young person might come in contact with at school. Coordination and cooperation between school staff is also key, so that there is consistency in the support provided, increasing children’s psychological safety. No unexpected changes to the plan should be made without the parents and/or the young person’s knowledge and agreement as this is likely to increase 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 support. This could be the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo), the Mental Health Lead in the school, Head of Year or the school nurse. This is so that the young person and their family know where to go for support, or to give feedback, when needed.

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.

1. **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.

**When should a school involve external professionals such as Educational Psychologists**

**(EPs)?**

EPs can support with consultation, training, assessment and intervention. As already mentioned, providing targeted support as early as possible will help prevent attendance difficulties from becoming entrenched. EPs can work with schools supporting young people that need a more targeted approach through the planned assess-plan-do-review process.

Gathering AND ACTING ON young people’s views

Person-centred planning, which puts the wishes of young person at the centre should be an integral part of the **graduated approach** described above (assess-plan-do-review cycle). As well as listening to young people’s views, adults should aim to empower them to voice their opinions and communicate their views and feelings. This should include an adult working with them to find alternative ways for children experiencing anxiety to communicate their feelings. This can be an integral part of feeling safe in school.

Gathering student’s voices on mental health difficulties and experiences that are affecting their wellbeing should be at the centre of a **whole school approach** to supporting mental health and EBSA prevention (see the [Children’s Society Guide](https://mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk/media/kzmcqwiz/gcr-2022-well-being-support-guide.pdf) 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).

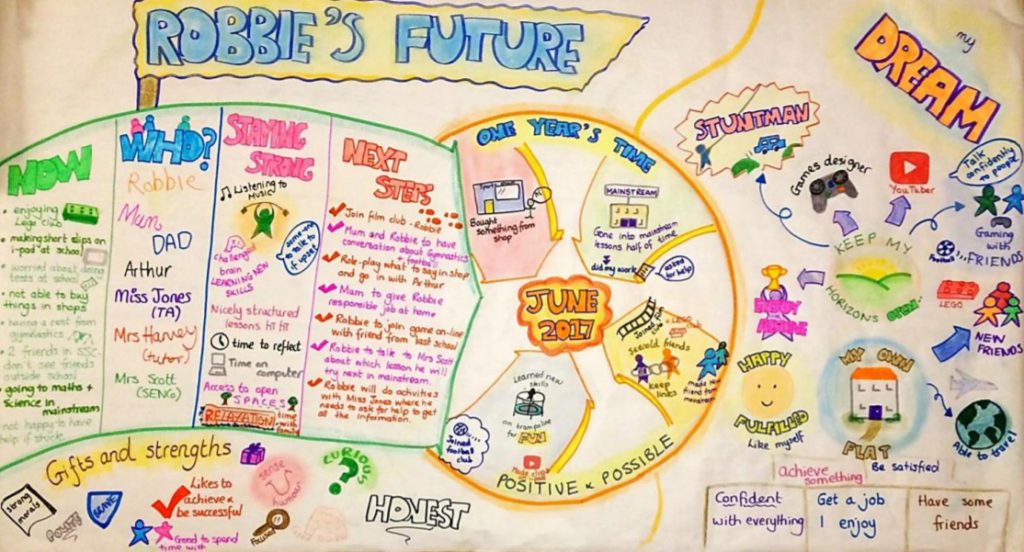
Adults may use person-centred tools such as [Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope (P.A.T.H)](https://www.kirkleeslocaloffer.org.uk/sendco-professional-information-and-resources-page/support-plans-i-apdr-msp-s-iep-s/path-planning-alternative-tomorrows-with-hope/) or [The Ideal School](https://edpsy.org.uk/blog/2020/drawing-the-ideal-safe-school-an-optimistic-approach-to-returning-to-school/) when gathering student views and planning support with them ([see WSCC guidance for examples of child-centered support plans](https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fwestsussex-local-offer.s3.amazonaws.com%2Fpublic%2Fsystem%2Fattachments%2F1123%2Foriginal%2FEBSA_Guidance_-Support_Plan.docx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK)). Other tools such as the [School Wellbeing Cards](https://www.schoolwellbeingcards.co.uk/) (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. Below is a ‘life path tool,’ developed by one of our educational psychologists (Dr Hannah Brickley) which:

* Explores CYP views, experiences, goals and aspirations for their future.
* Used to work out the steps needed for a CYP to reach their goals and involve and engage key people who can help them.

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

A black and white page of a school path

Description automatically generated with medium confidence



* A PATH is a visual way of presenting the journey towards a positive and possible future.

In line with research, a local study conducted by an educational psychologist in Hammersmith and Fulham highlighted the following factors that contributed to the successful reintegration into school for two young people:

***Positive relationships with peers and adults***

*“So I think that the biggest overarching factor was trust… trust that she knew she was in a safe place. Trust that she knew that she had an adult that would perhaps listen to her… she had confidence in the people that she was working with…”* [Teacher*]*

*“That sort of camaraderie… relationship that she had with everybody* … *there's one particular occasion where she had frozen in the playground and couldn't do anything. Actually, it wasn't me who got her to where she needed to be It was one of her friends.”* [Teacher]

***A positive, supportive, and inclusive school ethos***

*“The teachers were really positive about her ‘I'm so proud of her. She's done this’…They were always really good at praising her in that school. …They still celebrated her in assembly without her there…she was included in quite a nice way.”* [Parent]

*“Everyone around her wanted, you know, what was best for her. And so that was that was very clear… There was understanding, there was recognition, there was space. And that led to a number of changes”* [Educational Psychologist]

***Students’ individual qualities and intrinsic motivation***

*“Someone with kind of high levels of anxiety but turned up every week. Even at the beginning, when anxiety was kind of its highest around the sessions. She always engaged”* [Educational Psychologist]

*“I had to really engage her with the GCSEs element and keep her focused on what it is that she wants in order to get to where she wants to go”*[Mentor]

***A gradual approach at the young person’s pace***

*“There was no expectation that she should return to school immediately. …it was at her pace, that she was comfortable”* [Educational Psychologist]

*“I think just being able to do it at my own pace, I guess… the fact that I was allowed to go slowly was reassuring because I didn't think I could go any faster”* [Young Person]

***A collaborative supportive network***

*“And they (school) tried to help me go into classrooms because I had really bad panic attacks about going into classrooms…. So it was kind of really, really helpful that they knew where to start”* [Young Person]

*“I did build up a relationship with mum for support, and you know, not just me, but also her head of year… And mum, you know, we were definitely on the phone a lot with mum”* *[School Nurse].*

Case studies

The following case studies illustrate the importance of effective communication, taking young people’s views into account, as well as an organised and adaptable gradual approach when supporting young people to successfully reintegrate back into school.

**Primary case study**

***Background***

Johnny’s (pseudonym) attendance difficulties had an early onset during primary school years (related to separation anxiety) but got worse during the COVID-19 pandemic when Johnny was in years 1 & 2. 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.

***Presenting situation***

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 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.

***Assess***

School sought Educational Psychologist Involvement, 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.

***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.

***Do***

The 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. The autism specialist teacher worked with school staff on autism awareness and understanding autism needs. 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.

***Review***

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.

***What was the result?***

By the end of year 5 Johnny 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, a 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**

***Background***

Emma (pseudonym) found it difficult to engage with school from the beginning of year 7, when she transitioned to a secondary 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.

***Presenting situation***

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.

***Support Plan***

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 (see below). The school offered a flexible, personalised and coordinated approach, but also professionals such as the Educational Psychologist (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.

***EP direct support***

The Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (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 (professionals or school) that she should return to school immediately, so she didn’t feel rushed. colours. To address Emma’s intense anxiety and freezing responses, the EP devised innovative techniques that the school took on board where she could draw when feeling intense anxiety (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.

***What did the school do?***

School staff were 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 were essential to her reintegration plan: Emma had support in most lessons from adults (learning support assistants) who had 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.

***Continuous Review***

Emma’s mother and SENCo had regular review meeting where they would devise a plan, review it 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 the EP and just stay for lunch in the SEN suite. This was gradually increased until she was able to stay in most lessons, with the flexibility that she could always get out of lessons (if she needed to) without having to ask for permission.

***What was the result?***

This coordinated effort between home-school supported by external professionals across a whole academic year resulted in a significant improvement in Emma’s attendance and subsequently she was able to set her GCSEs in year 11 and progress towards sixth form education.

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