

Emotionally-Based School Avoidance (EBSA)



What is EBSA?

A broad term used to describe children and young people who experience severe difficulty in attending school due to emotional factors (typically anxiety).

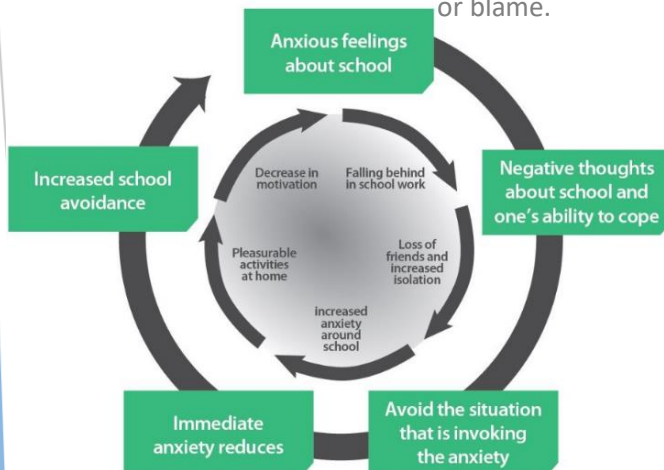
It is distinct from absence due to illness, truanting or absence condoned by parents/carers.

Anxiety & EBSA

Anxiety is a key feature of EBSA. A certain amount of anxiety is natural and common, but children experiencing EBSA experience significantly heightened levels of anxiety that impact on their ability to cope with everyday life and school experiences.

Avoidance is a method of trying to control what feels like an uncontrollable situation. As shown in the diagram below, this can quickly become a perpetuating cycle where the child or young person feels unable to return to school.

The anxiety cycle:



"No-one asked my opinion, I would have liked to have gone to school but I couldn't".

(Purcell and Tsvetk, 2008 p.21)

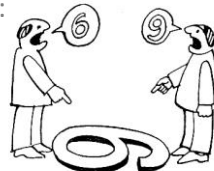
What might you notice?

- ✓ Difficulty attending school
- ✓ Periods of sporadic / frequent / prolonged absence
- ✓ Reluctance to attend school trips
- ✓ Anxiety on separating from family members
- ✓ Under-achievement
- ✓ Social isolation
- ✓ Distressed behaviours (in response to specific school situations)
- ✓ Physical changes e.g. sweating, headaches, tummy pains.

NO SINGLE CAUSE

It is tempting to look for a simple explanation but the research shows that a complex interplay of factors often underpin EBSA, involving:

- child/young person
- home
- school



Each person may have a different and valid perspective. Recognising this promotes respect and avoids criticism or blame.

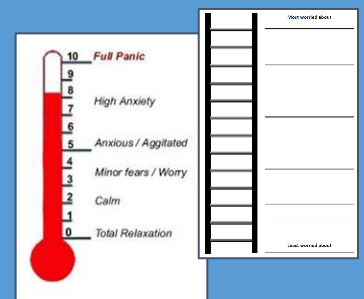
When there is a difference of views, it is often more helpful to focus on *HOW* the behaviour is occurring rather than *WHY*. It may take more than one discussion to process emotions before moving on to the practical steps of assessing the situation and making a plan.

WORKING WITH THE CHILD / YOUNG PERSON

Children and young people who avoid school often use this approach as a strategy to manage anxiety. Any discussion about returning to school will raise anxiety, as it is a proposal to change their method of coping.

What can I do?

- Listen without judgement.
- Acknowledge that it can be hard to talk.
- Let them know you are interested in what they think and how they feel.
- Try approaches* involving visuals e.g. an anxiety thermometer /ladder



- Give opportunities for drawing and selecting responses rather than verbalising.

* The approach taken depends on age, level of understanding and language.

WORKING WITH PARENTS / CARERS

EBSA can put pressure on the whole family:

- It is upsetting and stressful for parents/carers to see the child/young person in distress.
- The child /young person may express this more at home than in school.
- There can be practical and financial implications e.g. work arrangements.
- Others in the household may feel roles and relationships have changed.

What can I do?

- Seek to fully understand the situation without judgement.
- Take time to build a collaborative partnership.
- Use active listening skills; explore perspectives, summarise the situation, clarify things sensitively.
- Identify an appropriate key person for the family.
- Establish the best method for regular communication.
- Once a plan is agreed, present a 'united front'.

Further support

If there are ongoing concerns following an Assess-Plan-Do-Review process, settings can seek involvement from outside agencies.

For example:

- Discussion with the setting's Educational Psychologist via planning meetings
- Referral to the School Well-being Service for consultation

FULLY EXPLORE THE SITUATION

Explore 'Push' factors towards attending school

Explore 'Pull' factors away from attending school



EBSA is most likely to occur when 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.

CREATE A REINTEGRATION PLAN

The plan should:

- ✓ Be put together in joint partnership with the child/young person, parents/carers, school staff and any external agencies;
- ✓ Follow an 'assess' – 'plan' – 'do' – 'review' process;
- ✓ Be well co-ordinated, graduated, flexible, optimistic and yet realistic;
- ✓ Agree small, achievable steps with the child/young person;
- ✓ Anticipate set-backs and how these will be overcome;
- ✓ Empower the child/young person to find and use alternative coping strategies that work for them;
- ✓ Be implemented consistently by everyone, once agreed, until the next review.



INTERVENE EARLY TO PREVENT EBSA BECOMING ENTRENCHED

A Successful Reintegration Plan...

- supports a return to school at the earliest opportunity
- is proactive, individual and person-centred
- establishes a key person to check in during the day (and/or who keeps in regular contact when out of school)
- identifies a safe place in school
- is shared with all staff (including supply staff) who work with the child/young person
- is reviewed every 2-4 weeks



EARLY IDENTIFICATION, ASSESSMENT AND INTERVENTION ARE VITAL TO A POSITIVE OUTCOME

This document was produced by City of York Educational Psychology Service (EPS).

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