



EMOTIONALLY BASED SCHOOL AVOIDANCE

Overview

This document provides an overview of what we mean by Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) and how schools can work with parents and children/young people.



Cambridgeshire
County Council

What is EBSA?

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to develop**

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and young
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What is Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA)?

Emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA) is an umbrella term used to describe when a child or young person struggles with attending school, or aspects of school, due to emotional distress, anxiety, or fear. Areas of difficulties that may affect EBSA include:

- mental health difficulties e.g. anxiety, social anxiety, health anxiety, low mood and obsessive-compulsive disorder
- social difficulties e.g. bullying, isolation
- factors in the home/community
- sensory overload or
- physical and/or health issues
- motivational issues (which may relate to mental health).

Children and young people who are described as experiencing EBSA often have prolonged absences from school which usually increase over time. If patterns of EBSA are recognised early, the child or young person may be attending school but avoiding particular people or lessons. Typically, it takes children and young people more effort and time to re-integrate into school when they have had longer periods of time away from the school community. However much of this depends on the nature of support given to children and their families once the child has been recognised as having difficulties relating to EBSA.

Why this definition?

The terminology relating to children/young people's school anxieties has undergone a number of changes in recent years. Within Cambridgeshire schools, particularly those that have had Cambridgeshire Therapeutic Thinking (CTT) training and/or Recovery through Relationships training, there is an increased focus on understanding the function of children/young people's behaviours by examining their underlying emotions, situations, or the wider systems affecting them. Previous definitions placed more emphasis on the term 'refusal' (Emotionally based school refusal - EBSR), which inadvertently implied that the young person has control over the school non-attendance, or that they are simply choosing not to attend. You may also see or hear reference to the term Emotionally based school non-attendance (EBSNA). However, this suggests that the term is only applicable to children who are not attending school at all. Different professionals may use slightly different terminology, according to what they feel most comfortable using. Whatever the terms are that are used, the current approach in Cambridgeshire is to focus on understanding the underlying reasons for the child or young person not feeling able to attend school, or aspects of their school environment, hence why the terminology emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA) will be used.

Understanding children and young people with EBSA

The 2022 Attendance Audit from the Children's Commissioner found that in Autumn 2021, 1 in 4 children were persistently absent. In 2018/2019, this figure was 1 in 9 – meaning that persistent absence has more than doubled in this time period.

For children with EBSA, school avoidance becomes the only coping strategy that they can use to avoid the emotional distress associated with being in school, in lessons,

and amongst their peers. For some, their avoidance strategy may be to miss lessons; whilst others might have difficulty attending for longer stretches. By understanding that avoidance has become their coping strategy, it is possible to consider the factors that may be contributing to their anxiety and to plan alternative pathways for them to re-engage in school.

It may be helpful to consider EBSA as being on a spectrum where children and young people may experience a range of difficulties. There may be a gradual shift in avoiding aspects of the school day. Typically, there are early signs of anxiety or distress in young people who develop EBSA. However these signs are sometimes either dismissed as being 'a phase' or regarded as part of the young person's characteristics (e.g., being shy or withdrawn).

Underlying reasons why EBSA may develop

Understanding the underlying reasons why children and young people develop EBSA is complex, yet key to developing a way forward. Often there is a complex interplay within several factors at home, school and within the child themselves. Some of the more common examples are:

- Social anxiety - fear of ridicule, isolation, social rejection, loneliness, bullying, feeling different.
- Anxiety around learning - fear of failure, letting others down, feeling unable to keep up, worrying about specific topics or teachers.
- Health anxiety - fear of not being well, difficulty coping with physiological effects of being in school (e.g. sensory sensitivities), fear of loss or change.
- Worries that related to things in the home – worries about separating from parents, parental health concerns (physical/mental or perceived illness), fears leaving a single parent, fears about a parent or sibling's safety.

The cycle of avoidance and anxiety maintenance

Anxiety is a natural response to stressful situations, and it is not uncommon for children to experience anxiety at some point in their lives. Avoiding anxiety-provoking situations can provide temporary relief from anxiety. However, it can also result in the maintenance of anxiety which can worsen the child's quality of life and emotional well-being in the long term. When a child avoids a fear, it reinforces the belief that the fear is dangerous and must be avoided. By behaving in this way, the child's anxious feelings are not challenged or tackled. Therefore, when they are required to do something that worries them in the future, they lack the confidence and experience to deal with these emotions and feelings. Sometimes this process is referred to as an anxiety maintenance cycle (Figure 1). In the long-term, children who rely on this approach to manage anxiety sometimes find themselves avoiding a range of different situations to avoid their anxious thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations. Over time, avoiding the fear can make the anxiety worse, as the child's world becomes more restricted, and their fear becomes more powerful.



Figure 1: EBSA Anxiety maintenance cycles (developed by Ed Psych Ed)

To break the cycle and move forward, a holistic view of the child/young person, their school experiences, and their family life should be understood. School staff, parents and the child/young person will need to work together to feel heard prior to planning a return to school (if a child is no longer attending school on-site). It's important to remember that school-avoidant behaviour is not a choice that the child is making, but rather a way for them to cope with their emotions and experiences.

'Push away' and 'Pull to' Factors

'Push away' and 'pull to' factors can be an important way of understanding why children/young people avoid school (or other situations that cause them anxiety). Figure 2 can be used to help adults to consider what factors may push children into avoidance strategies and away from school (i.e., Risk Factors) and what factors may help pull them back towards school and help them feel able to manage their anxiety outside the security of their home (i.e., Resiliency Factors).

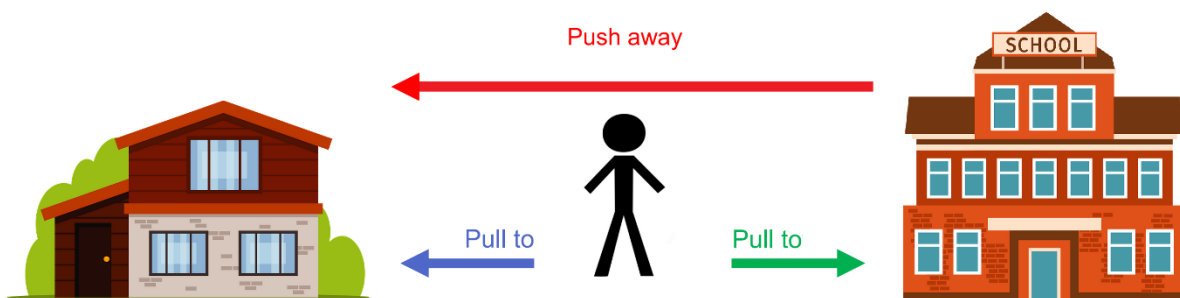


Figure 2: 'Push away' and 'Pull to' factors.

For children and young people experiencing EBSA, it is important to explore the ‘push away’ and ‘pull to’ factors for any individual within both the home and school environments.

At school:

- The **‘Push away’** factors could be some of the things that prevent the child or young person from feeling like they can attend school. For instance, they may experience higher levels of anxiety or stress getting ready in the morning or on the journey to school. They may also be struggling with academic challenges or feeling like they don't fit in with their peers. These negative experiences can cause them to feel like they don't want to go to school.
- The **‘Pull to’** factors, on the other hand, refer to the positive experiences that can motivate the child or young person to attend school. These can include things like feeling connected to their peers, enjoying certain classes or extracurricular activities, or having a supportive teacher who can help them feel comfortable and safe at school.

At home:

- The **‘Pull to’** factors at home may include avoiding anxiety provoking situations and negative outcomes, spending more time with their caregivers and engaging in positive experiences at home. Overall, the child or young person may feel safer and more emotionally contained within the home.
- The **‘Push away’** from school factors within the home can include negative experiences or emotions that the child or young person may be facing within the household, such as parental illness. For example, they may feel something might happen to their unwell parent while they are away and then not want to leave them as a result.

How can schools work with parents and young people to help?

All schools should be able to make reasonable adjustments over time to ensure that children are supported to understand their anxiety, their triggers, and their physical/emotional responses. If a child/young person is not attending school consistently, school staff have a responsibility to plan and send work home for them, mark any work that they receive and communicate regularly with the student and their family.

School staff should consider their universal (whole school) approaches as well as specific or targeted strategies. In Cambridgeshire, schools can refer to the **EBSA toolkit** for further guidance and resources around developing whole school and specific/targeted EBSA provision.

School staff should meet with parents and young people who are experiencing EBSA regularly. Often, this is co-ordinated by the school SENCO (Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator). However, there are times when this type of support is given by a pastoral team member, particularly if the child/young person is not thought to have any other special educational needs or disabilities (SEND). It is important that children and young people's needs are understood and assessed using a framework that focuses on understanding the child/young person's anxiety and any elements that impact on this.

EBSA and the Law

Key documents:

[Summary of responsibilities where a mental health issue is affecting attendance \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

[Support for pupils where a mental health issue is affecting attendance: effective practice examples \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

Key points raised:

- This guidance applies to **any** pupils displaying any social, emotional or mental health issue that is affecting their attendance. It is **not only** for pupils who have a diagnosis, or a disability or special educational need.
- Any actions taken to support attendance are referred to as “**reasonable adjustments**”.
- **School staff must record absences as authorised where it is not possible for a pupil to attend due to illness (both physical and mental health related).**
- Any associated anxiety about attending [school] should be mitigated as much as possible by creating a plan to implement reasonable adjustments to alleviate specific barriers to attendance. These adjustments should be agreed by and **regularly reviewed** with all parties, including parents/carers.
- In developing a plan to support attendance through reasonable adjustments, school staff will need to take into account the **individual circumstances of the child**, being mindful of safeguarding responsibilities as set out in the Keeping children safe in education 2022 guidance.
- As part of any plan to support the child to attend well, schools should facilitate relevant pastoral support, including any support that can be offered by the pupil’s most trusted adults in school.
- There is **no need to routinely ask for medical evidence to support recording an absence as authorised for mental health reasons.** In instances of long-term or repeated absences for the same reason, however, seeking medical evidence **may** be appropriate to assist in assessing whether the child requires additional support to help them to attend more regularly, and whether the illness is likely to prevent the child from attending for extended periods.
- In very exceptional circumstances, where it is in a pupil’s best interests, a plan to help a child to attend well may involve the use of a temporary part-time timetable to meet their individual needs. For example, where a medical condition (including a mental health condition) prevents a pupil from attending school full-time and a part-time timetable is considered as part of a re-integration package.
- Any part-time timetable arrangements should be designed with the specific barrier to attendance in mind, have a **time limit** by which point the pupil is expected to attend fulltime, (either at school or at an alternative provision setting), and have **formal arrangements in place for regularly reviewing** the timetable with the pupil and their parents/carers.
- **A part-time timetable may also refer to full attendance at school, but with different arrangements for the attendance of lessons.** This is also a valid option and example of a reasonable adjustment (see the effective practice

examples for more detail). We would encourage school staff to consider the same principles outlined in this section for this type of arrangement (i.e. for it to be regularly reviewed, agreed by all parties, building back up to full time spent in classes, etc.).

- Schools should inform the LA where pupils are likely to miss **more than 15 days**, and work with the family to provide educational provision whilst determining with the LA whether alternative provision should be provided under section 19 of the Education Act 1996.
- **LAs must not follow an inflexible policy of requiring medical evidence** before making their decision about alternative education. LAs must look at the evidence for each individual case, even when there is no medical evidence, and make their own decision about alternative education.
- **Taking forward attendance prosecution should only be considered where all other options have been exhausted or deemed inappropriate.** Where in-school pastoral and/or external specialist support is facilitated but not engaged with voluntarily, schools should work with LAs to consider whether to formalise support or to enforce attendance through legal intervention in the normal way under their existing powers. This includes instances where a mental health issue is affecting attendance.