

# Emotional Based School Avoidance (EBSA)

## What is EBSA?

Emotional based school avoidance or EBSA is characterized by a young person finding attending school very difficult or sometimes impossible due to the severity of the emotional responses they encounter when trying to attend. These emotional responses could come in the forms of frustration, anger, tiredness, lack of attention, fear or anxiety.

It is often very difficult for schools to separate wilful non-attendance or truancy from EBSA. It is usually to classify a young persons absence as EBSA is there is an underlying emotional reasons for the absence alongside the absence of anti-social behaviour. A young person with EBSA is far more likely to stay at home during their period of absence than a young person who isn't experiencing the emotional aspect of school avoidance.

The majority of schools are moving away from using the term "school refuser". This is because it implies that the absence is being chosen and is a deliberate act. For young people with EBSA this is not the case, as the overwhelming emotion is the primary cause for none attendance. Schools are also choosing the avoid using "School phobia" as this implies that the reason for non-attendance is the school itself. This is not always the case and professionals need to take a wider approach to understanding the reasons for non-attendance.

## What are the EBSA risk factors?

Risk factor at School	Risk factor at home	Child specific Factors
Bullying	Separation or parental divorce	Temperament
Difficulties in specific subjects	Parent or family physical or mental health problems	Fear of failure
Transition	Overprotective parenting	Physical illness
Structure of the school day	Dysfunctional family interactions	Age (critical years for children are 5-6, 11-12, 13-14)
Academic demands	Being the youngest child	SEND needs
Transport or journey to school	Bereavement	Separation anxiety
Exams	Young carer	Trauma or ACES
Peer relationships		

## What does EBSA look like?

Young people experiencing EBSA will often present in the following ways.

- Crying
- Pleading
- Refusal to get ready or dressed for school
- Rumination
- Using avoidance strategies
- Sleep problems
- Psychosomatic illness – due to the likelihood of high levels of trauma and therefore cortisol in certain young people this can actually manifest itself as real illness.
- Anger and aggression – this is often due to the situation feeling out of control for the young person and their behaviour is an attempt to re-take control to ensure they feel safe.

## Identification of EBSA

Schools are most able to support young people when they are in school. It is therefore vital that early identification and pre-emptive intervention is used to decrease the likelihood of a young person experiencing EBSA.

Schools should consider using the following sources of information to screen their cohorts to identify young people who are exposed to the EBSA risk factors.

- Transition information between establishments
- Link social workers
- School nurse
- Local PCSO team
- School open events
- Anonymous disclosure pathways “Whisper”
- Meetings with key families
- Family information sharing documents
- “Worry checklists” for pupils to complete on transition
- Tutor or pastoral interviews with pupils
- Disclosure pathways within school – drop boxes, online report a concern tools, student safeguarding teams
- ACES trackers with information transferrable between settings

Tina Rae has produced an excellent publication on Emotional Based School Avoidance which includes a fantastic selection of intervention resources for schools to use to tackle EBSA but also a simple EBSA checklist which many schools are choosing to use as a diagnostic tool.

Within the Tina Rae publication there is also an excellent “transition issues” document. Secondary schools would be well placed to use this as a screening tool

for their upcoming year 6 pupils whilst they are still in their primary setting. This simple assessment tool can be used with young people to highlight elements of secondary school that they may be worrying about.

This may provide the secondary school with useful information allowing them to implement either whole school practice to support young people with anxieties about transition or support individuals more specifically. The results from the “transition issues” screening tool would be a helpful additional to the school’s pastoral or pupil profiles to be shared with teaching staff.

There are other assessment strategies being used by school across BANES to help identify EBSA. It is worth considering this guidance alongside the advice given in the Supporting mental health section of the toolkit.

Some schools choose to screen all pupils to get an idea of the mental health of pupils across the school. Simple screening tools are used for this. Nationally the Pupil Attitudes to Self and School (PASS) provided by GL assessments is a popular and trusted tool.

Some schools also choose to use simple assessments like the Mood and Feelings questionnaire. This simple assessment allows schools to investigate the mood of young people within the school and could be used as a pre-emptive screening tool for EBSA. Similarly, some schools choose to use slightly more detailed assessment tools like the strengths and difficulties questionnaire, which requires a greater degree of adult input into both the assessment and the interpretation of results.

Where pupils attitude to learning or mood highlights causes for concern schools should consider using a more detailed assessment tool. Many schools choose to use either Boxall profiling or Thrive assessments for this purpose. Both interventions could be useful as interventions for pupils who many otherwise experience EBSA in the future.

Schools should always be aware of particularly worrying findings from these assessments and should consider referring through the school’s safeguarding channels or to specialist services for further support if required.

### [Taking a trauma informed approach to EBSA?](#)

It is important for schools to view EBSA through the lens of trauma. Staff should have a good understanding of trauma and the emotional and physical responses that young people will be experiencing. In conjunction with this guidance schools should refer to the “ACES” section of the toolkit.

Where pupils have been highlighted through the early identification process as being at risk of EBSA information should be shared across the school’s teaching and support staff about the young persons anxieties, emotions and particular trauma they may have experienced.

## Supporting young people experiencing EBSA

Many schools choose to use the 5 P's model when supporting young people with improving attendance.

1. The problem - consider the EBSA risk factors
2. The predisposing factors (background) – consider the information gathering options available to you.
3. The precipitating factors (triggers) – consider using an anxiety ladder with the young person. Discuss factors that are high stressors and factors that are low stressors. Seek to overcome the low stressors first.
4. The perpetuating factors (personal, family, environmental factors that sustain the problem)
5. The protective factors (personal, family, environmental factors that could help resolve the problem)

These five areas are often use to form the basis for a pastoral or attendance support plan in many schools. Schools should also considering the following when developing the format for attendance support plans.

- The young person's voice and opinion
- The young person's academic history including any SEND needs.
- The young person social group and social skills
- Results from any screening assessments that may have taken place.
- Information about home routines.
- Information about what the young person does when they are absent from school.
- Schools should consider enquiring about the young persons EBSA effects other aspects of family life.
- Consider times when attendance has been good. What was the antecedent for this?
- Strategies that have helped in the past should be included. Schools may wish to include where the young person sits in class, the lessons they feel comfortable in, how and when they will enter the classroom, an exit plan if they need one, will they be asked questions in class, will they be expected to join in group activities. The more detailed the support plan the more uncertainly can be removed the more likely school attendance is.

## Ideas and strategies to support young people

- Ensure that the young persons voice is heard and that anxieties are acknowledged.
- Ensure that all staff are EBSA trained and understand the philosophy the school are using to improve attendance.

- Ensure that EBSA is included in the schools attendance policy alongside strategies to support young people as well as the methods used to identify EBSA as early as possible.
- Schools should consider how the EBSA fits into the schools leadership structure. Many schools chose to place EBSA with the schools mental health lead. Schools should consider how this role links with attendance officers and pastoral leaders.
- Ensure the young person knows they are not to blame for their anxiety
- Reassure the young person that the school will do everything it can to support their reintegration gradually.
- Schools will need to work sensitively with families but also understand that the family may be a contributing factor to the absence.
- During a period of absence it is essential that the school continues to keep in touch via a variety of members of staff to ensure the young person feels “kept in mind”.
- Use the transition issues checklist to target the aspects of school that the young person finds least difficult first. Gradually build up exposure to elements of school that the young person finds more challenging.
- Use small steps towards bringing the young person back into school. Ensure these steps are pupil led. Schools should focus on each step being secured before exposing the young person to further challenge.
- Try to develop a key member of staff who the young person feels comfortable with to play a key role in the reintegration process.
- Think about how the young person would like to come into school. Is a later start or quieter entrance more appropriate at first. Some schools use early starts or nurture rooms after school as the first step towards improving attendance.
- When a pupil does attend try not to draw excessive focus to the fact that they are struggling to attend or that they have attended. Instead focus on positive elements of their work or personality.
- Some young people may benefit from very short-term reintegration plans as the long-term goal may be too daunting. Conversely other young people may find comfort in a long-term plan and the expectations are clearly laid out with no apparent surprises to “de-rail” them.
- Schools will need to spend time working with the young person on the anxiety cycle. Once young people have an understanding of this the short term rise in anxiety caused by exposure to the problem becomes understandable. Schools should ensure that the young person understands that the emotional response to the stressor is perfectly normal.
- Anxiety ladders are very useful tools to work through with young people. The young person lists from high to low the stressors preventing school attendance. The school should look to implement support plans that focus on the lowest stressors first.
- Many young people experiencing EBSA are likely to benefit from many of the strategies outlined in the SEMH and mental health sections of the toolkit. Of

primary importance are self-regulation strategies like mindfulness, talkabout, ELSA or CBT.

- Some schools have reported that in the absence of the young person parent in school many young people are calmed by knowing where a key member of staff is at all times of the day. For some young people supplying them with the timetable of the key member of staff can be very reassuring.
- For some young people and their parents keeping a written diary of anxieties can be helpful in unpicking the potential causes for the EBSA.
- Young people who experience EBSA may benefit from time out cards, exit plans or regular re-set times during the day. It is useful for professionals to remember the young person will likely be expending a lot of energy just coping with the stressors of being in school.
- Parents report that Sunday evenings and Monday mornings are peak times for anxiety in young people experiencing EBSA. It may be helpful as part of the attendance plan to have an agreed routine to follow during these times.
- Schools should be aware that success for the young person initially may not come in the form of academic success. Improvements in mental health and attendance are the primary goals.