



Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) Guidance document for parents/carers in Sutton

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What is EBSA?

Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) is a term used to describe children and young people who have a severe difficulty in attending school due to emotional factors, often resulting in prolonged absences from school. This is different from truancy, which refers to non-attendance at school without parent/carer knowledge. It is hoped that this guidance document will support families to take steps in supporting their child who is experiencing EBSA.

Four main reasons for school avoidance

Kearney and Silverman (1990) defined four main themes that cause school avoidance. Parents/carers and their child can complete a questionnaire about their experiences to explore which of these main themes may be contributing to their avoidance. Support for your child to re-engage in learning will depend on the underlying reason they are avoiding school.

Theme	Examples	
1) To avoid uncomfortable feelings (anxiety/low mood) brought on by certain things in the environment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Noise/crowds. Transitions between lessons or to and from school. Learning demands. 	
2) To avoid social or evaluative situations that might be stressful, such as academic demands or social pressures.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Difficulty with interacting with peers. Lack of a peer group. Evaluative situations such as tests, presentations, or P.E. 	
3) To reduce separation anxiety or to gain attention from significant others, such as parents or other family members.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Time at home with parents/ family members. Feeling that their parents need them. 	
4) To pursue tangible rewards outside of school, during school time, that make staying at home more enjoyable/comfortable.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Watching television. Playing online gaming. Spending time with friends outside school. 	

Potential triggers

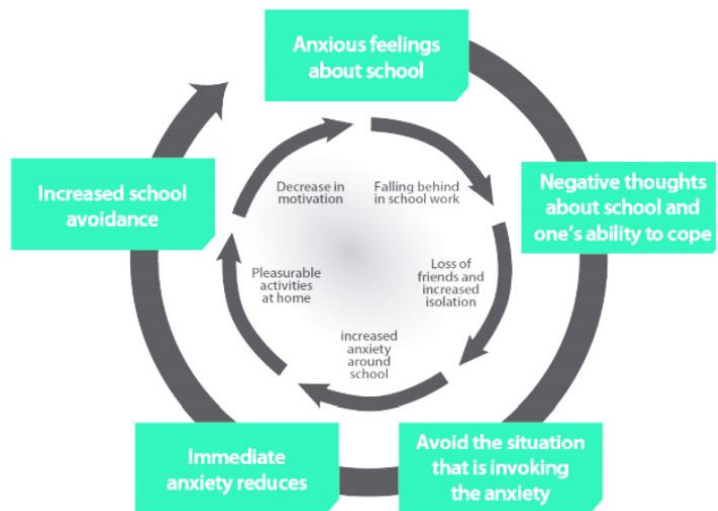
All children have differences in their family circumstances, experiences of school, and their own attributes which can protect them, or place them at increased risk of experiencing EBSA. It is therefore helpful to be aware of the potential triggers that may be relating to your child's experiences so that support can be put in place for them. Consider which of the following triggers may relate to your child:

- Factors within school such as academic pressures (e.g. learning/exams), social pressures (e.g. bullying), or the structure of school (e.g. transitions, particular lessons, or break/lunch times).
- Factors relating to their family such as changes in family circumstances (e.g. separation/divorce/bereavement/ young carer), parenting styles (e.g. being overprotective), family stress or family history of EBSA.
- Factors relating to themselves such as low confidence/self-esteem, physical illness, unsupported difficulties (e.g. Autism), or anxiety. There are also particular ages that show increased risk such as 5-6 years, 11-12 years, and 13-14 years.

Anxiety and avoidance

Anxiety is a natural physiological response to potential threat. A certain level of anxiety is normal and helpful (we do better in some situations with a bit of anxiety such as performing in an exam). Sometimes, anxiety can feel scary and impact on our everyday lives. This occurs when the challenge outweighs our ability to cope and builds to the point that your child feels overwhelmed and impacts on their capacity to think, reason, and cope with everyday demands e.g. school. This can be understandable given the pressures and changes that have been out of their control over the last two years. For example, school closures, home working, reduced social interaction, reduced freedom, and fear of contracting Covid-19.

One of the most common ways of managing anxiety is to avoid the situation as this can provide immediate relief. However, this is a short-term solution as it can increase anxiety and make it even more difficult to face the situation next time. As the diagram shows, the longer a child is out of education, the more their worry increases, and their desire to stay at home increases. Parents may often spot the warning signs first, and therefore responding early to unhappiness about school is important.



Parents may unintentionally reinforce school avoidance by what is perceived as ‘rescuing’ their child from the uncomfortable feelings brought on by attending school. For example, agreeing for them to stay at home because of how they are feeling. Consequently, their child remembers the intensity of their feelings about the situation and their avoidance strategy is therefore reinforced. However, if parents encourage school attendance, their child is more likely to remember the success of attending, experience a reduction of anxiety and therefore attendance is more likely promoted. It is therefore important to encourage and support your child to return to education as quickly as possible. The following diagram explains negative reinforcement in more detail.

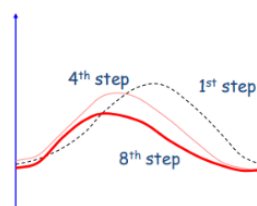
How negative reinforcement works



Impact of rescue:

- remembers situation at the height of fear
- prevents habituation
- no experience of mastery
- escape is reinforced

From Chansky (2004)



Impact of exposure:

- remembers success that allows habituation
- learns anxiety passes on its own
- willing to approach increasingly challenging situations
- feeling of mastery
- reinforcement for hanging in

What can you expect school to do to support your child?

Action planning is an important part of getting your child back into school as quickly as possible and needs to be part of a joined-up approach with school, parents, your child, and any professionals involved. You should be able to expect the following:

- **Commitment:** There is a shared understanding of your child's experiences, and everyone is working towards the same aims and agreed actions at regular meetings.
- **Consistency:** Everyone involved is communicating and following the agreed plan. Pre-planning coping and calming strategies that your child can use at school and home will be helpful. All adults will need to be consistent in their approach.
- **Realistic:** Your child returning to school quickly will be a priority. However, detailing small-step achievable targets is an important part of action planning. It will be more helpful to set ten small targets which can be met in a graduated process, rather than three larger targets which are not successfully achieved.
- **Intervention based on underlying themes:** Everyone involved works together to explore the four themes listed at the start of the document to identify the best explanation for your child's experiences. This will impact on the intervention chosen.

What can you do at home to support your child?

Once you have identified possible indicators that your child is experiencing anxiety which may be contributing to school avoidance, it is important to contact school to share concerns and develop an action plan, based on the main theme identified. The action plan should be agreed and implemented by school and home. The family plays a key role in influencing children's emotional health and wellbeing and engagement in school.

Whilst your child is at home during school hours, it is important to make the day represent school as much as possible. For example, waking up at normal times, getting dressed, and having a typical morning routine. Stick to school timings and this means that your child should only be doing academic or mundane tasks during the school day. During this time, remove all games, phones, computers, or other tangible motivating reinforcers. Every hour, ask your child if they want to go to school. Ensure that your child has set break and lunch times and a set time for the end of the school day e.g. 3pm. Evening routines should also be established e.g. dinner, bath, and bedtimes. Putting this structure in place will ensure that being at home doesn't become a motivating reinforcer for your child.

The following may also help based on the most likely reason for EBSA (as above).

1) To support your child who is avoiding uncomfortable feelings brought on by attending school

- Reassure and encourage your child that anxiety is a natural, normal feeling that everyone experiences. Talking to your child about how anxiety feels in the body and calming strategies such as deep breathing and visualisation.
- They are likely to need support to manage their own emotions, perhaps through pastoral support within school or a therapeutic intervention.
- Read books with your child to develop their understanding of anxiety and how it impacts on them. For example, the Cognus EP service EBSA Guidance for children; 'What to Do When You Worry Too Much' by Dawn Huebner or 'Starving the Anxiety Gremlin' by Kate Collins-Donnelly.
- Develop an action plan with your child (and school) with small steps for gradual exposure. Tell your child that they are brave for going to school and you are proud of them for every small step they complete towards going back.

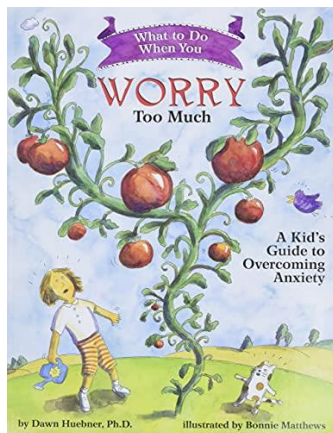
- Irrespective of your own thoughts and feelings about school, ensure that your child receives positive messages that school is safe and supportive so there is a shared and consistent message from school and home.
 - Develop scripts to use in the morning routine if your child is experiencing anxiety to validate and normalise how they are feeling . For example, “I know you’re feeling worried, and it can be scary. I can feel worried sometimes too. Lets follow the plan we agreed yesterday, and we can talk about it tonight”.
- 2) To support your child who is avoiding situations that might be stressful, such as social pressure/ academic demands.**
- Provide time for your child to learn about anxiety and how this affects their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours (as above).
 - Speak to your child about social skills and provide opportunities for them to practise in real life social situations e.g. developing scripts to talk to peers and manage disputes.
 - Discuss your child’s concerns, and if they are demonstrating ‘what if’ thinking e.g. ‘what if everyone laughs at me’, or ‘what if I fail the exam’, follow up with gentle questions to help them reframe their thinking such as ‘what’s the chance that will happen?’ and ‘what’s the worst-case scenario if it did, and is it really that bad?’
 - Liaise with school to ensure changes are made to support the stressful situation e.g. differentiation in their learning, adjustments to exam situations, or a social club.
 - Reframing school attendance as ‘practice at life’ and school is a training ground for the development of social and life skills. Therefore, you can be a coping model for your child by showing them how they can manage in times of stress e.g. developing and modelling strategies to help in these situations.
- 3) To support your child who is avoiding school to reduce separation anxiety or gain attention from significant others.**
- Provide time for your child to learn about anxiety and how this affects their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours (as above).
 - Provide highly structured and consistent morning and evening routines even if they are not currently in school so they have a secure framework to live around. They should be waking up 90-120 minutes before school starts.
 - Establish positive and individual time to spend with your child outside school hours and limit the attention your child receives when they do not attend school.
 - Establish rewards for attending school and appropriate consequences if they do not.
 - If your child asks the same questions over and over, answer once, and then calmly remind them that they know the answer and turn away.
 - Be aware of behaviours that parents can do to unintentionally reinforce school avoidance. For example, jumping in too quickly to ‘rescue’ them from uncomfortable feelings. Therefore, avoid being overprotective (e.g. always allowing them to stay at home). They need to see their parents have confidence in them and believe that school is a safe and supportive environment for them to attend. Click the link for the following video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hkmvuV6PK20>.
- 4) To support your child who is avoiding school to pursue rewards outside of school.**
- Increasing ‘rewards’ for attendance and disincentives for nonattendance. This can be negotiated using a ‘contract’ for everyone to agree.
 - During school time, when your child is at home, ensure that the day represents school as much as possible so that home does not become a motivating factor. For example, sticking to school timings and completing activities at a table, whilst removing motivating activities such as TV or computer games.

Emotionally Based School Avoidance for parents/carers – Sutton guidance document

- It may be necessary to escort your child to and from school, and them to be escorted in between lessons.
- Speak positively about the benefits/ positive experiences of being in school.
- Try to be calm, supportive, and consistent when communicating with your child about school, acknowledging their concerns and referring to the contract.
- The contract will need to be reviewed periodically to make sure that it is relevant and achievable.

Contact information for additional support

Organisation	Details	Contact information
CYP's school	This should be your first point of contact	Check the individual school's website
Cognus EP Service	You can request a call back from an Educational Psychologist to problem solve key concerns.	Click link - Educational Psychology Service - Phone Consultations for Parents & School Staff.
Sutton Information, Advice and Support Services (SIASS)	Impartial, confidential advice about education, health, and social care for CYP and parents/carers.	sutton@siass.co.uk 0208 323 0462
Off the Record Sutton	Anxiety, low mood – counselling support	sutton@talkofftherecord.org 0208 680 8899
Kooth	Free online mental wellbeing community for CYP	http://www.kooth.com/
CYP's Wellbeing Team Service YouTube Channel	Recorded workshops, webinars, and short videos on various wellbeing topics, for parents/ young people and school staff	Webinar 'School-based anxiety – Emotionally Related School Avoidance'
School Nursing	Various concerns related to social, emotional, and mental health needs	Parent line: 0208 770 5409 CYP line: 0208 770 4409 schoolnursing@sutton.gov.uk



Cognus
No Limits on Learning
Educational Psychology Service

Do you worry about going to school?
Guidance document for CYP in Sutton

Name: _____
School: _____
Year group: _____

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