



Anxiety Based School Avoidance  
***Resources and advice***  
Ottery St Mary Primary School

This resource pack has been prepared to support families of pupils who may begin to show 'Anxiety Based School Avoidance' (ABSA), also referred to as 'Emotionally Based School Avoidance' (EBSA) behaviours. The strategies and suggestions outlined in this pack will provide guidance and next steps for both the school and families, enabling them to work together and move forward positively. This pack was informed by the work carried out by Babcock LDP Educational Psychology Service, the work of Kearney and Silverman regarding school absenteeism, the work of Dr Pooky Knightsmith and SEMH advice from Young Minds and The Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families amongst others.

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## What is 'Emotionally Based School Avoidance' or 'School refusal'?

Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) is sometimes known by other terms, such as 'school refusal', 'emotionally based school avoidance' or 'emotionally based school non-attendance'. There is some discussion around the most suitable term to use - for example the term 'refusal' may imply that a pupil has made a choice - despite this often not being the case. It refers to the difficulties a pupil may face in entering school or remaining in classes for an entire day, however there is currently no accepted universal definition for EBSA.

Pupils struggling with EBSA can find it very challenging to attend school. Some may demonstrate varying patterns of attendance and others are able to attend successfully with modified timetables and high levels of support. It is not always easy to know how to help or respond, and the reasons for these patterns of behaviour can be hard to identify<sup>1</sup>.

*'School refusal occurs when stress exceeds support, when risks are greater than resilience, and when 'pull' factors that promote school non-attendance overcome the 'push' factors that encourage attendance'<sup>2</sup>*

## What might school avoidance look like?

For most young people struggling to attend school due to anxiety, they will be experiencing significant feelings of worry and these will usually be linked to physical symptoms such as feeling sick, having a headache or stomach ache. Young people may deal with their fear of attending school in different ways. There is no definitive list of symptoms or behaviours. School avoidance can extend from the minor to quite extreme types of behaviours. Other than vague and general symptoms of an illness, some other common signs or behaviours may include<sup>3</sup>;

- Anxiety about school, e.g. the classroom, doing work, having lunch, doing PE, walking in the corridors
- Difficulties separating from parents/carers or wanting to be close to someone at home
- Avoidance of other students due to unresolved friendship difficulties or due to anxiety caused by social situations (for example, worrying about being expected to talk in class)
- Difficulties settling to sleep on school nights
- Seeming anxious or agitated on the mornings of school or the night preceding
- Once at school, the young person may complain of feeling sick and try to be sent home/collected
- The young person may promise (and in their heart genuinely mean it at the time) to go 'this afternoon' or 'tomorrow' if they are only allowed to stay at home now
- Some may go through the morning routine quite normally, but are then unable to leave the house or maybe they leave for school but turn back home before getting there
- Some young people may 'always' appear to have a reason as to why they cannot attend on a particular day, these reasons could be school or peer related or just because they have the wrong shoes, bad hair or similar
- Flat refusal to get out of bed or to go to school, giving absolutely no reason
- Running off / hiding until they feel it is safe to stay home (and the pressure to attend has gone)
- Some will gladly take punishment or sanctions as the price of not going to school or appear to show little concern over the consequences of their refusal on their parents (legal or impact on work etc.)
- Some display anger, aggression towards those who try to encourage them to go to school

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<sup>1</sup> Babcock LDP Educational Psychology Service (2016) Developing Effective Support Systems for Young People Experiencing Anxiety Based School Avoidance: An Exploratory Study and Good Practice Guidance for Schools

<sup>2</sup> Thambirajah M.S., Grandison K.J., and De-Hayes L. (2008) Understanding School refusal: a handbook for professionals in education, Health and Social Care. Jessica Kingsley, London, UK.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.babcockldp.co.uk/inclusion-and-ehwb/anxiety-based-school-avoidance>

## What causes EBSA?

There is no single cause for EBSA, and there are likely to be various contributing factors as to why a pupil may find it challenging to attend school. However, Kierney and Silverman (1990)<sup>4</sup> identified the following four main ‘functions’ or reasons for school avoidance to help determine the underlying causes of a child’s school refusal and then use that information to determine a specific evidence-based treatment plan.

Function of refusal	Examples
To avoid objects or situations at school that make the child feel unpleasant, distressed or fearful	<i>Avoiding lunchtime situations which are unpleasant Avoiding key adults of whom the pupil is fearful Avoiding crowded situations or large groups of children</i>
To avoid social situations at school that are painful to the child (school-related performance)	<i>Being fearful of tests or sharing scores Avoiding reading out in front of the class Avoiding situations such as modelling PE skills in front of a class</i>
To reduce separation anxiety or gain attention from a parent or significant other	<i>Struggling to leave parent / carer at drop off Feeling worried about the wellbeing of a parent whilst they are at school</i>
To obtain tangible rewards that make staying home more enjoyable / comfortable than going to school	<i>Wanting to stay at home to play online games Wanting to spend school time at home watching TV Wanting to spend time with friends who are not in school</i>

Furthermore, research by the Babcock EP service noted that there were no “clear or identifiable ‘causes’ [for school refusal], *but a complex interlinking mix of factors relating to school, family/home, out of school events and also within-person factors*”<sup>5</sup>

Following on from the national school closures during 2020 and 2021, pupil experiences will have further impacted upon their view of school, and feelings of safety or anxiety. Disruption to routines, messages from the government and media to stay at home, alongside possible unidentified or identified traumas experienced will further add to the complexity of causes for school refusal.

### Fight, Flight, Freeze, Fawn or Flop<sup>6</sup>

Pupils who have experienced trauma can be pushed out of their ‘window of tolerance’ - the state where they are calm enough to learn - into displaying fight, flight, freeze, flop or fawn behaviours. Understanding the triggers for this and addressing these triggers is the next step to support a pupil experiencing EBSA.

<sup>4</sup> Kearney, C.A., & Silverman, W.K. (1990). A preliminary analysis of a functional model of assessment and treatment for school refusal behavior. *Behavior Modification*, 14, 340-366

<sup>5</sup> Babcock LDP Educational Psychology Service (2016) *Developing Effective Support Systems for Young People Experiencing Anxiety Based School Avoidance: An Exploratory Study and Good Practice Guidance for Schools*

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wcm-1FBrDvU>

## What factors can best support a pupil experiencing EBSA?

Below are some of the identified factors<sup>7</sup> which can best support a pupil experiencing EBSA. Common threads include; maintaining excellent communication between home and school and ensuring a holistic, positive, pupil-centred approach.

<p><b>A pupil centred approach</b></p>	<p><b>Realistic small-step plans</b></p>	<p>A holistic view of pupil including a good understanding of the <b>context</b> surrounding behaviours</p>
<p>Pupils feeling <b>understood and accepted</b> by adults at home and at school</p>	<p>Developing feelings of <b>safety and security</b> at school</p>	<p>A strong sense of <b>'belonging'</b> in school</p>
<p>Developing <b>trusted relationships</b> with familiar adults</p>	<p>Support and strategies to <b>manage emotions</b></p>	<p><b>Partnership and communication</b> between home, school and additional agencies</p>

## How can we help at school?

As identified above, clear communication between home and school is the first step to address school avoidance. By collaborating with parents and carers, we can offer support both with ideas to help at home and an in-school plan. At Ottery St Mary Primary School, we have created an EBSA pathway, which will help home and school identify the next steps to support their child.

<sup>7</sup> Babcock LDP Educational Psychology Service (2016) Developing Effective Support Systems for Young People Experiencing Anxiety Based School Avoidance: An Exploratory Study and Good Practice Guidance for Schools (P8)

# ABSA Pathway

## EBSA identified as concern by parents or school

### Information Gathering

[Parent checklist](#) shared  
[Information gathering](#) form completed  
Meeting booked  
Scaling activity completed in school

### First point of intervention

Collaborative child-led plan to be developed between home and school  
Appropriate school based intervention selected from list of [available interventions](#)  
Interventions to be recorded and reviewed by school

### 10 days of intervention

Attendance tracked and behaviours noted  
Communication between home and school continues according to plan

### Progress Noted

Continue with plan *or*  
Adapt plan in light of successes  
Implement for further 10 days  
Celebrate success with pupil

### No Progress

SLT / DSL review of plan with parents  
Consider referral to EWO  
Identify additional agency support available  
Make necessary referrals

### Meet and adapt action plan

Set meeting between home and school  
Identify next steps in referral processes  
Review plan so far and adapt

## School based interventions

### 1. Promotion of a positive relationship between home and school.

- Celebration of homework - particularly topic 'choice' homework - at school and at home.
- Supporting the pupil to participate in extra-curricular school opportunities such as trips, clubs and whole school events.
- Positive sharing at start and end of school day - positive language around school modelled by all adults.
- Alternative strategies for communicating regarding challenges offered - eg emails or telephone calls - away from pupil.

### 2. Curriculum / wellbeing at school

- Pupil wellbeing is addressed through the PSHE curriculum which includes units on 'Mental Health and Wellbeing' and 'Emotional Logic' - This curriculum is taught throughout KS1 and KS2.
- Pupils are taught 'growth mindset' through ReflectED
- 'Worry boxes' are available in class for pupils to confidentially share their worries.
- Additional support may be available for pupils through small group or 1:1 check ins with a TA
- Use of 5 point scale or Zones of Regulation, alongside support from TA, where appropriate
- Possible access to '3 o'clock club' where it is identified that this may support regulation prior to the end of the school day.

### 3. Wellbeing resources

- Resources available to support pupil wellbeing at home and at school are included in the [wellbeing handbook](#) and on the [school website](#).
- Use of '[3 good things](#)' to structure positive daily conversations over the course of a week.
- School 'Risk and Resilience' cards activity with TA to identify further support factors.

### 4. SENco involvement

- Class teachers will work with the school's Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo) to assess if the pupil has a significant learning difficulty and agree appropriate support following the graduated response tools.
- Assessments may take place to inform further referrals required, and adaptations to provision or school based plans.
- SENco involvement may wait until situational difficulties are resolved

### 5. Adaptation to school routines

- In liaison with the class teacher and SLT, it may be helpful to make adjustments to the start or end of day routines.
- This may include; identifying a quiet place to enter school, a safe space for a brief pre-lesson calming activity, or sharing an object which can help the pupil to calm (C19 RA permitting)
- Shared signals to identify moments of 'overwhelm' may be developed
- Planned in moments for 'reset' may be timetabled - for example sensory circuits or mindfulness techniques
- Support for changes in school routines / day may be provided through a visual representation / timetable such as first / next board or use of communication-in-print resources
- Adjustments may be made to lunchtime for example by identifying a lunch buddy, or planning how lunch and break will be used to be restorative moments in the school day.

*Please note - an adjustment to the amount of time a pupil spends in school would be part of an AnnexR and would require additional agency support including advice from the Local Authority.*

**Strategies to support key functions of school refusal:**

Function of refusal	Strategies to support
<p><b>To avoid objects or situations at school that make the child feel unpleasant, distressed or fearful</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Provide education about anxiety and effective response techniques ( eg Emotional Logic)</li> <li>● Recognize patterns of behaviour - Risk and resilience card activity</li> <li>● Teach ways to manage physical symptoms (bunny breaths, mindfulness techniques)</li> <li>● Plan in 'regular resets'</li> <li>● Develop anxiety/avoidance hierarchy</li> <li>● Gradual re-exposure to school setting</li> </ul>
<p><b>To avoid social situations at school that are painful to the child (school-related performance)</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Provide education about anxiety and effective response techniques ( eg Emotional Logic)</li> <li>● Modelling and role-play</li> <li>● Developing shared signals with class teacher to share if feeling overwhelmed</li> <li>● Gradual re-exposure to anxiety based situations (for example removal of quizzing pressure gradually scaffolded back into school experience)</li> <li>● Develop an anxiety/avoidance hierarchy</li> <li>● Pre-teaching for key work causing anxiety</li> </ul>
<p><b>To reduce separation anxiety or gain attention from a parent or significant other</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Structure and routine</li> <li>● Clear expectations</li> <li>● Focus on positive behaviours</li> <li>● Problem solving techniques</li> <li>● Altered / mindful use of language with child</li> <li>● No options regarding school attendance</li> <li>● Limit attention when pupil does not attend</li> </ul>
<p><b>To obtain tangible rewards that make staying home more enjoyable / comfortable than going to school</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Increasing "rewards" for attendance and disincentives for nonattendance, <i>i.e. laptop time, access to internet</i></li> <li>● Limit the attention a child receives during non-attendance</li> <li>● Support their travel to and from school</li> <li>● Make school as stimulating as possible - linking school work to special interests</li> </ul>

## Parent / carer support checklist

### Open a dialogue:

This [resource](#) from Young Minds can support starting a conversation. Focus on listening and providing emotional support, and reassure them that you can work together with school to make things better.

### Don't ask leading questions

Whilst it is important to encourage your child to talk about their anxiety, asking leading questions should be avoided as this can reinforce their worry and validate their anxiety. For example, try asking "How are you feeling about the school trip?" rather than "are you worried about the school trip?"

### Identify coping strategies:

This might include strategies from the [wellbeing handbook](#), breathing exercises or identifying a safe person or object who can reassure. Talk about times in the past when your child has felt anxious and made it through. By supporting your child to learn to tolerate their anxiety, only then will it begin to decrease.

### Establish a morning routine:

This covers everything from getting up to having breakfast, getting dressed, leaving the house and arriving at school. This will help to create a sense of security. It might also help to include elements of school preparation the night before - packing their bookbag together or laying out their uniform.

### Make a plan:

Use the resources in the school wellbeing handbook to identify a plan - practice the plan together. This might include sharing [3 good things](#) at the end of each school day, or thinking of positive things to share with the class teacher or a peer the next day.

### Calm parent, calm child:

If you are anxious, your child will pick up on it and may experience an increase in their own anxiety. So when you want to reduce your child's anxiety, you must manage your own anxiety first. Parents can do this by modelling how they successfully manage anxiety; let your child know when you are using a coping skill (e.g. "I'm feeling a little bit nervous about that, I'm going to take a few deep breaths before I respond").

### Try not to reinforce your child's fears:

It is vital that conversations between adults about EBSA do not happen within earshot of the pupil where at all possible. Be aware that body language, tone of voice and behaviours can all reinforce anxiety. If your child is anxious about separation from you, they may become upset when going into school. For example, long emotional goodbyes may unintentionally communicate to the child that there is something to be worried about and this can reduce feelings of coping. Consider how your own behaviours and responses may be influencing your child's anxiety.

### Encourage your child to become a thought detective:

You can do this by teaching them the 3Cs method below:

**Catch your thoughts.** Imagine every thought you have floats above your head in a bubble. Try and catch one of the worried thoughts and think about this (e.g. "I don't have any friends in school"); it can help to write it down.

**Collect evidence.** Next, collect evidence to support or negate this thought. (Supporting evidence: "I had a hard time finding someone to sit with at lunch yesterday." Negating evidence: "Sophie and I do homework together and she's a friend of mine.")

**Challenge your thoughts.** Think about the evidence you have collected and decide whether, based on the facts, the worry is true (e.g. "No, it's not true, Sophie is my friend at school").

### **Make positive links between home and school:**

Share a school timetable at home - modelling curiosity about the school topics may encourage your child to be curious about their learning and take small steps to engage with their class work.

### **Be consistent:**

Allowing the child to avoid school 'just this once' or because it is easier than a battle could be the beginning of a slippery slope. What may seem like the easy way out for you now could prove damaging later when the habit of avoidance settles in.

### **School is not optional:**

Ensure that the child is clear that an education is not optional and that by law you are responsible for making sure they get an education and that means them attending their school every day. Do not underestimate the impact of punctual attendance, as beginning the school day consistently late may further reinforce feelings of worry.

### **Don't avoid everything that causes anxiety:**

Avoiding things that make your child upset is a natural response, but it may serve to reinforce the anxiety. By taking a child out of a situation that makes them anxious they are learning this as a coping mechanism, and this can become a repeating cycle. An alternative method is to try an **anxiety avoidance hierarchy**. This is a process where the child breaks down their anxiety into manageable steps, and gradually increases these steps to overcome their anxiety.

## Information Gathering - Questions to consider at home

<b>Name:</b>		<b>Class:</b>		
<b>Risk factors / context</b>				
<b>Has something changed recently at home?</b>				
<b>Are there any historical issues the school should be aware of?</b>				
<b>Home and school routines:</b>				
<b>What is your morning routine?</b>				
<b>What is your evening routine?</b>				
<b>Do you find time for a positive recount of the school day?</b>				
<b>What calming activities does your child find helpful?</b>				
<b>Function of ABSA behaviours</b>				
<b>Which of these 'functions' do you feel your child's behaviour fulfils?</b>	To avoid objects or situations at school that make the child feel unpleasant, distressed or fearful	To avoid social situations at school that are painful to the child (school-related performance)	To reduce separation anxiety or gain attention from a parent or significant other	To obtain tangible rewards that make staying home more enjoyable / comfortable than going to school
<b>Strengths and protective factors</b>				
<b>What aspects of school does your child enjoy?</b>				
<b>Does your child have a trusted adult in school?</b>				
<b>Does your child have a strategy for calming in school?</b>				

## EBSA, school attendance and the law

The Education Act 1996 places a legal duty on all parents to ensure that their child has an education. When this education is provided in a school setting, parents must ensure their child attends regularly. If the parent is unable to ensure this, they can be held accountable for an offence under S.444 Education Act 1996; failure to secure the regular school attendance of a child. The term regular has recently been defined to mean 'as prescribed by the school'. For the majority of pupils, this means attending school full-time. Any unauthorised absence is therefore irregular attendance.

As with any law, the parameters are firm; the Education Act 1996 goes further as the offence is one of strict liability. This means there are only certain permitted defences a parent can use for their child missing school. One such defence is the child was unfit to attend school due to ill health; the parent must prove this to be the case. Only a Headteacher can authorise absence from school. They may request supporting medical evidence from the parent which shows the pupil is unfit to attend school. This request is often made to avoid the matter moving into a legal process. Medical evidence can include appointment cards, prescriptions, reports from medical professionals, etc. The weight and value of the evidence is one for the Headteacher to consider in their decision making of whether an absence is to be authorised or not. When unauthorised absence occurs, depending on the length and reason for the absence, the school has the option to refer to the Local Authority via the Attendance Legal Panel (ALP) for advice and intervention. The ALP discharges the Local Authority's statutory duties associated with school attendance. On receiving the referral, the ALP will gather evidence from all involved before deciding on next steps within the legal framework. All cases are considered on a case by case basis at the point of referral and throughout the process. If there is no evidence to support a statutory defence, a judgement is made about the most suitable form of legal intervention.

Interventions are offered within a legal framework with an investigation to establish if an offence can be proven. This can lead to a variety of actions including the use of Fixed Penalty Notices (FPNs) and/or court action, both in the Criminal Court (offences under the Education Act), or in the Family Court when seeking an Education Supervision Order. If the decision is made to go forward with a prosecution, consideration is given as to whether this will be the fast track pathway, a normal or an aggravated offence. The fast track route is generally deemed appropriate when support is in place for the family from other agencies and provides a further 12-week period in which the parent is expected to demonstrate a significant improvement in their child's school attendance.

For schools with young people experiencing EBSA and struggling with attendance, it is the Headteacher's decision whether to authorise absence or not. If a school decides to refer a student to the ALP the expectation would be that the school will have tried an array of strategies to encourage and support the young person's attendance such as those as outlined in this document as well as requesting any supporting information from medical professionals.

The school attendance policy can be found [here](#).

## EBSA and request for Education Health and Care needs assessments

Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) are for children and young people who have a special educational need or disability that cannot be met by the support that is available at their school or college setting. Most children and young people with special educational needs will have help given to them without the need for an EHCP at the SEN support level. In some cases, children who display EBSA behaviours may have underlying special educational needs and require support above the SEN support level. If this is the case schools or parents can request that the local authority undertake an Education Health and Care (EHC) needs assessment. In order to be able to decide whether an assessment should occur, the Local Authority will need to see evidence that the school have taken appropriate action, over a sustained period of time, following the assess, plan, do and review cycle and there is evidence that the child or young person has not made adequate progress or has only made progress because of a very high level of support.

Further information about the local SEN offer and our SEN policy can be found on [our website](#).



## Additional Resources and Advice For Parents / Carers

<https://www.babcockldp.co.uk/inclusion-and-ehwb/anxiety-based-school-avoidance/support-for-parents>

<https://www.youngminds.org.uk/parent/a-z-guide/school-anxiety-and-refusal/>

<https://thrivealliancegroup.com/school-refusal-8-effective-intervention-strategies/>

<https://www.annafreud.org/parents-and-carers/>

[www.creativeeducation.co.uk](http://www.creativeeducation.co.uk)

[www.notfineinschool.co.uk](http://www.notfineinschool.co.uk)

<https://www.teamsquarepeg.org/>

## School Policies and Curriculum

SEND Policy

<https://www.otteryprimary.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/OSM-SEND-Policy-2020-21.docx.pdf>

Attendance Policy

<https://www.otteryprimary.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/OSM-Attendance-Policy-May-2021.docx.pdf>

Wellbeing Resources

<https://www.otteryprimary.co.uk/parent-and-carers-hub/wellbeing/>

PSHE Curriculum

<https://www.otteryprimary.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/PSHE-Curriculum-Overview.pdf>

## Legislation / DfE Documents

SEN Code of Practice

<http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/send-code-of-practice-0-to-25>

Supporting Children At School with Medical Conditions (2015)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/supporting-pupils-at-school-with-medical-conditions--3>

School Attendance Guidance

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/907535/School\\_attendance\\_guidance\\_for\\_2020\\_to\\_2021\\_academic\\_year.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/907535/School_attendance_guidance_for_2020_to_2021_academic_year.pdf)

Education Act 1996

<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1996/56/contents>