

Facing Your Fears

Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA)

Guidance for supporting children and young people experiencing EBSA using a 'step ladder to success', produced by Kent Educational Psychology Service.



With Thanks to West Sussex Educational Psychology Service for their excellent work on the topic of Emotionally Based School Avoidance which has been invaluable to creating this document
(www.westsussex.local-offer.org/information_pages/460-emotionally-based-school-avoidance)

What is Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA)?

Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) is a broad umbrella term used to describe children or young people who experience significant difficulty attending school due to emotional factors. This results in severe emotional reactions when attempting to go to school (e.g., fearfulness, anxiety, bad temper, misery, physical symptoms, low self-esteem etc) and typically leads to prolonged absence from school with parental knowledge. Research illustrates that EBSA is not usually caused by a single factor but underpinned by several complex and interlinked factors (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Thambirajah et al., 2008). Examples of these factors include:

- To escape the negative and uncomfortable feelings triggered by school-related stimuli
- To avoid social aversion and evaluation, and to prevent feelings of rejection.
- To receive additional attention from significant others, such as parents/carers and/or reduce separation anxiety.
- To engage in other activities outside of the school setting, such as playing video games.

Kearney & Spear (2012)

Anxiety and EBSA

Anxiety has been identified as a key component of EBSA. It is normal for children and young people to experience some anxiety. However, for some children and young people, these feelings of anxiety are heightened, impacting on their functioning and school experiences.

When anxiety is related to school avoidance, the child or young person is likely to experience anxious or fearful thoughts about going to school and their ability to cope in this environment. Often these feelings are accompanied by physiological symptoms or anxiety, such as shaking, nausea, sweating etc and may begin the night before school or even a few days prior to this.

To avoid the overwhelming emotions and fear associated with attending school, children and young people often exhibit behaviours to avoid going to school, for example refusing to get ready for school. They may show hostile behaviours in an attempt to control what feels like a very 'out of control' situation. (Thambirajah et al., 2008). These behaviours, and the avoidance of school contribute to the maintenance of EBSA over time.

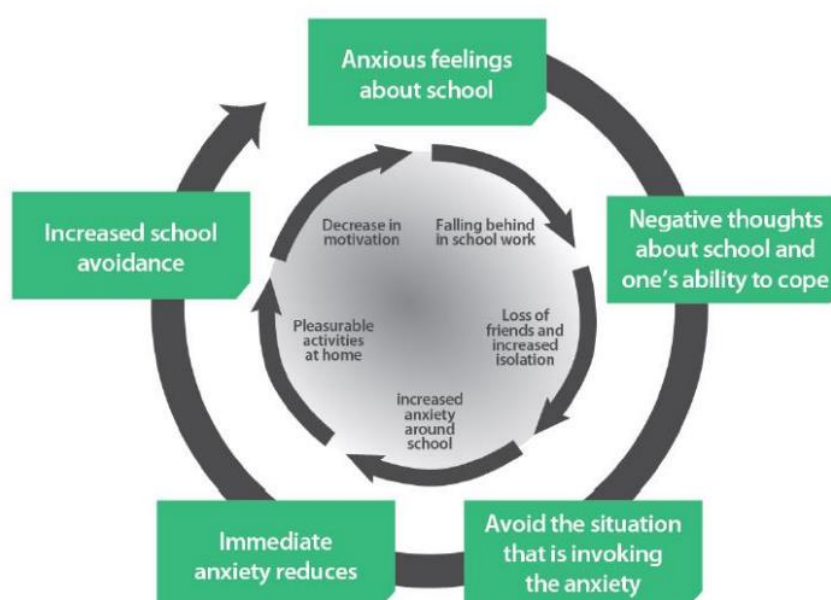


Diagram to illustrate the initial anxiety causing the non-attendance and the secondary maintaining factors (West Sussex Educational Psychology Service, 2018)

Supporting Children and Young People Experiencing EBSA

Early identification of EBSA is essential. The longer problems remain unaddressed the more the difficulties and behaviours become entrenched and the poorer the outcomes for the child or young person. This starts with close monitoring of attendance, noticing any patterns in non-attendance or changes in behaviour or attendance. It is also important to identify potential early indicators for EBSA. The Profile of Risk created by West Sussex Educational Psychology Service is a useful resource for supporting practitioners to identify areas of risk (see EBSA guidance produced by West Sussex Educational Psychology Service, 2018). If significant risks of EBSA are identified, it is important to gather further information from the child/young person, parent/carer, and key members of school staff. Strategies to support the child or young person should be implemented as soon as possible.

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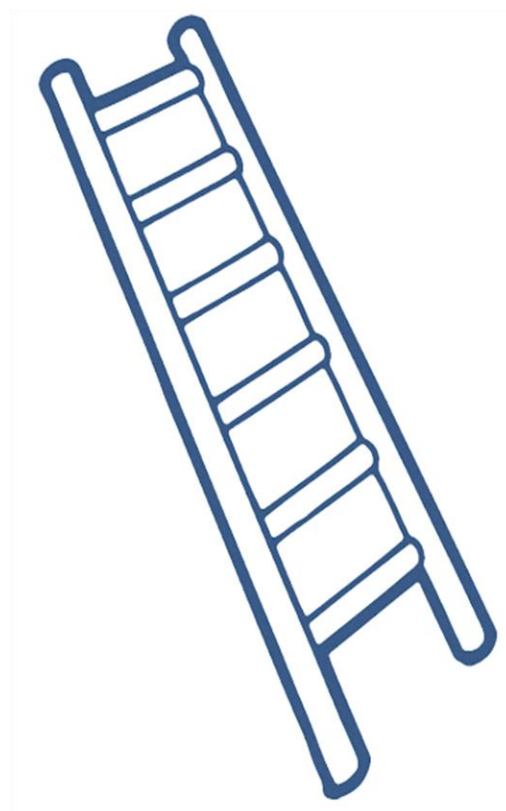
A variety of interventions to support a child or young person experiencing EBSA are outlined in the EBSA guidance produced by West Sussex Educational Psychology Service. Interventions should help the child or young person to learn about anxiety and how it affects thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. They should be taught anxiety management strategies, such as breathing exercises and relaxation techniques.

'Facing your Fears' – Step Ladder to Success

When people are fearful of something, they tend to avoid the feared objects, situations, or activities. Although this avoidance may help reduce feelings of anxiety in the short term, it tends to exacerbate the fear in the long term.

One intervention to support a child or young person experiencing EBSA involves a gradual re-exposure to the school setting using an avoidance hierarchy, created with the child or young person. The child or young person is asked to name situations (or shown cards representing possible fears) and asked to rank them according to how they feel about that situation or activity from 'least worried about' to 'most worried about'. These situations or activities are then placed on a ladder from the 'least scary' to the 'most scary'. The child or young person gradually works their way up the ladder completing the activities. At each stage, it is important that the child or young person is supported to consider how they will cope in the situation and what support they will need. They should start with the item that causes the least amount of anxiety (bottom of the ladder) and only work their way up the hierarchy when they have overcome this fear and consolidated this several times. They should not move up the ladder until the anxiety is reduced or ideally absent at the rung the child/young person is on. Some fearful situations may need to be broken down into even smaller steps. If the child/young person does not seem to be making much progress up the ladder, consider reducing the 'gaps' even further.

Most Feared
<i>Going into the lunch hall without a friend</i>
<i>Going into lunch hall with friend</i>
<i>Going to PE lesson</i>
<i>Going into favourite lesson</i>
<i>Joining in with a small group activity</i>
<i>Staying in the resource base</i>
<i>Entering school building going to the reception area</i>
<i>Entering the school building when school is closed</i>
<i>Standing outside the building when the school is closed</i>
Least Feared



Further Resources and Useful Tools

Emotionally Based School Avoidance: Good practice guidance for schools and support agencies, produced by West Sussex Educational Psychology Service https://westsussex.local-offer.org/information_pages/460-emotionally-based-school-avoidance

Resources provided by West Sussex Educational Psychology Service include:

- Emotionally Based School Avoidance – Guidance
- Booklet for Parents/Carers
- Booklet for Young People
- Booklet for Children
- Profile of Risk of Emotionally Based School Avoidance
- Information Gathering from School ('Round Robin' form)
- Information Gathering and Integration
- Example Support Plan
- Whole School Audit
- Strategies for Young People with Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC)

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School Wellbeing Risk and Resilience Cards by Dr Jerricah Holder

<https://www.schoolwellbeingcards.co.uk/>

Facing Your Fears by Psychology Tools

<https://www.psychologytools.com/resource/facing-your-fears-cyp/>

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

References

- Baker, M & Bishop, F. (2015). Out of school: a phenomenological exploration of non-attendance. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 31(4), 354-368.
- Kearney, C.A., & Spear, M. (2012) School refusal behaviour. School-based cognitive-behavioural interventions. In R.B. Mennutti, A. Freeman y R.W. Christner (Eds.), *Cognitive-behavioural interventions in educational settings: A handbook for practice* (pp. 161-183). New York, NY: Taylor & Francis
- 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