



Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA)

Toolkit for schools

Version 1: March 2023

Authors: Jenny Feeney (Senior Educational Psychologist), Rhea Dosi, Hayley Morgan, Annabel Stenning (Assistant Educational Psychologists)

Table of Contents

Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA)	1
Toolkit for schools	1
Understanding EBSA	5
What is EBSA?.....	5
What causes EBSA?	5
Noticing EBSA early.....	5
How many children are affected by EBSA?	6
What leads children to feel unable to attend school?	7
Is EBSA caused by anxiety?.....	8
The need for thorough assessment	8
Why anxiety management is helpful.....	9
What do schools need to understand about anxiety?	9
What should schools do to reduce EBSA?.....	11
Practical guidance on managing non-attendance	12
Using the EBSA toolkit.....	12
Adjustments, support, and provision	12
Examples of reasonable adjustments	12
Examples of provision that might be ordinarily available	13
Examples of SEN provision	13
EBSA and absence coding	13
Absence due to illness.....	13
Absence due to EBSA	14
Provision for longer-term absence.....	15
Reduced timetables and EBSA	15
EBSA and unauthorised absence.....	16
School responsibilities to children experiencing EBSA	17
A note on off-rolling.....	17
Advice on absence	17
Toolkit part 1 – Prevention and Early Identification	18
Early Identification - Screening the school population	18
Prevention – school auditing	19
Whole school approaches to EBSA prevention	20
Whole school EBSA prevention – The PACE model.....	20

Whole school EBSA prevention – Restorative approaches	21
Whole school EBSA prevention – Belongingness	21
Whole school EBSA prevention – Whole School Nurture	22
Whole school EBSA prevention – Trauma informed practices	22
Whole school EBSA prevention – Emotional Literacy skill development.....	23
Whole school EBSA prevention – Emotion coaching	24
Whole school EBSA prevention – Promotion of emotional well being.....	24
Toolkit part 2 – Identification and Early Intervention	25
Working with Parents – Creating a shared narrative of EBSA	25
Understanding parental experiences	25
Individual EBSA formulation.....	25
Beginning the EBSA formulation	26
Tools for working with parents	27
Working with children – establishing a rapport	28
Trust before truth.....	28
Establishing a rapport – basic communication principles	29
Establishing a rapport – Psychological principles.....	31
Establishing a rapport – skills	32
Working with children – exploring individual EBSA	33
Anxiety scaling.....	34
The Incredible 5-Point Scale	35
The Blob People.....	35
School mosaics and anxiety landscapes.....	35
School Well-being cards	36
‘RAG’ Rating Systems	36
Function of School Avoidance – Card sort	37
Toolkit part 3 – designing a reintegration plan	38
Understanding the Psychology of reintegration planning	38
What is graded exposure?.....	38
What is habituation?	39
How does habituation occur?	39
The avoidance hierarchy	40
Psychological safety in graded exposure	40
Planning reintegration using graded exposure	41
Uncovering the situations that lead to avoidance	41
Building the avoidance hierarchy	41
Teaching children and young people to understand their experience	42
Using anxiety management tools to facilitate habituation.....	42
Appendix.....	44
Appendix 1: EBSA Risk Screening Tool	44
Appendix 2: Whole School Audit Tool	46

Appendix 3: Drawing the Tree of Life	51
Appendix 4: EBSA formulation tool.....	55
Appendix 5: Worries and how to talk to your child about them	61
Appendix 6: Instructions for the Mosaic Approach	63

Understanding EBSA

Before embarking on intervention, it is essential to have a good understanding of what we mean by Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) and the principles that underpin intervention design. You will find guidance on descriptions, causes and progression of EBSA in the following sections. It is recommended that schools conduct training with all staff using this resource and the training videos which were designed as an introductory course for all staff.

What is EBSA?

EBSA is a term used to identify a group of children and young people who are facing challenges in attending school. EBSA is apparent where difficulties with attending are the result of emotional factors and frequently children and young people (CYP) presenting with EBSA experience significant levels of both physical and emotional distress.

The emotional element of EBSA is what makes it distinct from other forms of non-attendance (truancy). It is also not 'refusal' to attend (though this term has been used in the past). Frequently children want to attend school and it is the overwhelming experience of stress, anxiety and other emotions that lead a child to feel that they must stay away or 'avoid' school.

What causes EBSA?

It is important to remember that EBSA is not a diagnosis and there is not one underlying need or collection of needs common to all children and young people who experience EBSA. The overwhelming emotions, thoughts, and feelings that children and young people experience may be the result of many different underlying special educational needs (SEN), adverse life experiences and developmental needs.

Researchers describe EBSA as happening when:

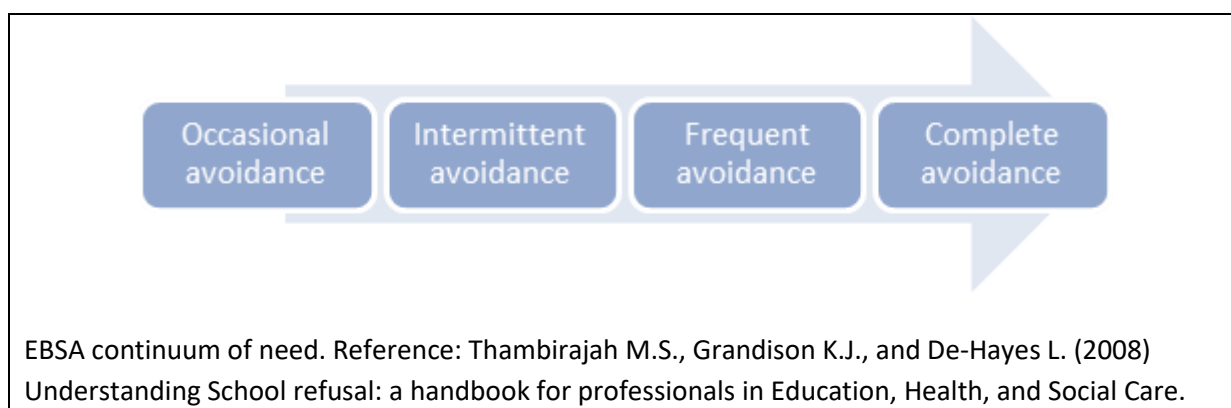
“stress exceeds support, when risks are greater than resilience and when ‘pull’ factors that promote school non-attendance overcome the ‘push’ factors that encourage attendance”
(Thambirajah et al, 2008: p. 33).

It is only through understanding the individual experience of each child or young person that we are likely to help them improve or manage their EBSA.

Noticing EBSA early

Though many researchers identify EBSA as being when difficulties with school attendance have escalated to the point where the child or young person has stopped attending for a period of time, we have chosen to describe EBSA across a continuum of need which includes those who are showing early signs or are at risk of becoming non-attenders. It is hoped that

by doing so that children and young people are given support in a timely way that may prevent chronic non-attendance and the associated impact on their attainment, inclusion, and well-being.



Children and young people will often show early signs of EBSA such as not wanting to get ready for school, feeling unwell on school days, missing occasional lessons, or avoiding particular activities in school. For some children and young people their internal coping skills or the external support put in place for them may be sufficient for them to be able to attend. However, they continue to face daily struggles with their emotions and the demands that are placed on them both in and out of school. It is therefore important to document concerns about EBSA early so that sufficient monitoring and support are maintained over time.

How many children are affected by EBSA?

EBSA may well be more common than you realise, particularly if we consider children across the continuum from emerging negative associations with school rather than just the chronic non-attendance stage which tends to be the focus of researchers. It is thought that between 1% and 5% of the school population are experiencing EBSA at any one time and that it affects between 5% and 28% of children at some point in their academic journey (note the wide range is due to the measures that researchers take from conservative estimates focussed on chronic non-attendance to those where EBSA is only just beginning to be documented by a school).

As schools code the absence of children experiencing EBSA in different ways it can be hard to understand the full picture. Research conducted by the 'Square Peg' parent organisation highlighted that between 2018 and 2019 10% of the school population had recorded absences with no given reason which may indicate that figures are higher than those captured in research. Fundamentally we want schools to understand that a significant percentage of their school population might helpfully be recognised as having needs that are currently or likely to cause EBSA if not supported.

Children who avoid school are likely to have poor outcomes in terms of their education, well-being, and inclusion in society and as such prevention and early intervention are imperative to limit the impact of EBSA on our children and young people's lives.

What leads children to feel unable to attend school?

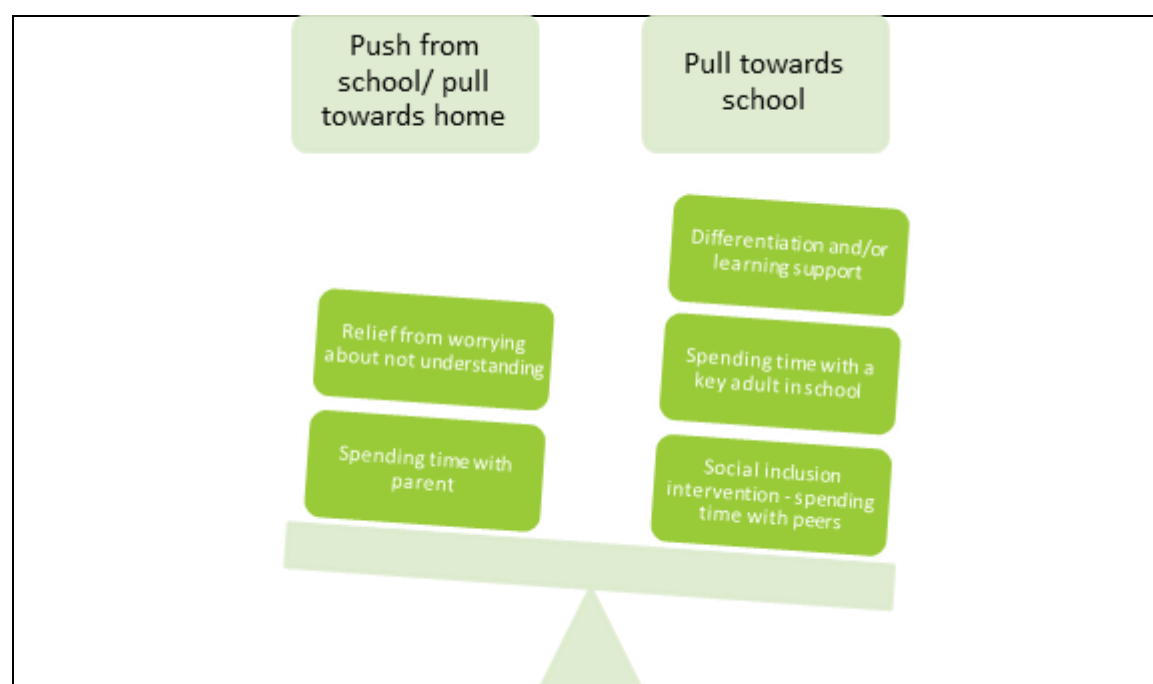
It can be helpful to think of all behaviour as being functional rather than unhelpful. If we can understand the reasons for behaviour, then we stand a better chance eliciting change.

There are four likely functions that underpin school avoidance and considering how they apply to each child experiencing EBSA should be the starting point to developing intervention.

Possible functions of school avoidance (adapted from Kearney and Silverman, 1990)	
To avoid situations specific to being in school which elicit high levels of stress (push from school)	Environmental: noise, crowds, the playground, smells, sounds Learning: reading, processing, general learning difficulties, work is too hard Expectations: exams, homework, attainment, behaviour Transitions: between groups, rooms, teachers
To escape social situations which cause feelings of discomfort (push from school)	Interaction difficulties: difficulties making and maintaining friendships Inclusion needs: social isolation, lack of belonging to a group Expectations: working in different groups, public speaking Negative interactions: bullying, poor relationship with a teacher
To spend more time with significant people (pull to home)	Family dynamic: recent change, separation and divorce, bereavement Well-being concerns: physical and mental needs of parent or sibling Safety concerns: domestic abuse Engagement: parents or siblings are at home
To spend time doing something that is more fun or stimulating (pull to home)	Activities: watching TV, playing computer games Engagement: spending time with a friend

It is important to note that if only function 4 is present then we would not consider this to be EBSA. Children and young people experiencing EBSA present with a combination of the above functions. These functions can be thought of as things that push and pull a child from school and towards home.

By understanding the individual functions/push and pull factors for a child or young person we can begin to think about how to re-dress the balance and create factors that pull them towards attending school. This might be through providing more support, making reasonable adjustments, or putting specific interventions in place.



Is EBSA caused by anxiety?

The need for thorough assessment

EBSA and anxiety are frequently spoken about interchangeably. It is important to conduct a thorough analysis of all the needs that might underpin anxiety. Anxiety is frequently an emotional presentation that arises when needs are not met – it is not true that all children experiencing EBSA have general anxiety needs. Consider a situation where an adult is in a job where the work is too hard, their colleagues bully them, and they have to work in uncomfortable physical conditions. Exposure to this situation over time may lead to anxiety. However, increasing the capacity to cope with anxiety is merely treating the symptoms and may not lead to longer term change. It is only by understanding the things someone needs to avoid (for example, the work is really hard) and making adjustments (for example, reducing workload or increasing support) that things will improve in the longer term and anxiety would likely reduce once the right things are in place. It is for this reason that we advocate for functional analysis as a starting point to understanding the needs that underpin avoidance.

Why anxiety management is helpful

Though there are many different underlying special educational needs (SEN), adverse life experiences and developmental needs that can lead to EBSA, anxiety is frequently the end result, and some would therefore consider anxiety to be a defining feature of EBSA. Even once appropriate provision has been identified and put in place, it may still take time for a child or young person to trust that their needs will be met and to experience a relief from their anxiety without the need for avoidance.

It is therefore important to understand anxiety and how it develops over time. Interventions and reintegration plans are also generally built upon the principles that underpin treatments for anxiety (for example, graded exposure) and the anxiety cycle is a helpful model for understanding how chronic non-attendance can arise following a period of not having individual needs met.

What do schools need to understand about anxiety?

“Anxiety is what we feel when we are worried, tense, or afraid – particularly about things that are about to happen, or which we think could happen in the future. Anxiety is a natural human response when we feel that we are under threat. It can be experienced through our thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations.” (Mind.org, nd).

It can be helpful to understand what anxiety is and how it can develop in order to support children. Anxiety is a normal and helpful emotion in the right place. It can help us by giving us the physical and mental resources that we need to prepare and respond to a novel situation. However, anxiety can overwhelm us and lead to both thoughts and feelings which are unpleasant (for example, feeling sick or worrying that people don’t like us). You may find it helpful to watch [The Happiness Trap: Evolution of the Human Mind - YouTube](#) video which explains this. You may find it helpful to show this to children and young people you are working with to help them understand what is happening to them.

Our natural response to thoughts and feelings which are unpleasant is to avoid the triggers or situations in which they arise. This response will lead to some short-term relief. However, it does not address the underlying thoughts and emotions and anxiety can grow due to ‘unhelpful thinking styles’ which psychologists call ‘cognitive distortions’. For example, we might ruminate on our worries (for example, constantly think about how we look), magnify them (think we are really ugly and unlovable) and overgeneralise (everyone is looking at me).



When we avoid something the negative thought patterns linked to it go unchallenged. In addition to this when we are anxious, we are primed to notice dangers in our environment and might selectively notice things which unfortunately can confirm our negative thoughts and feelings. In this way we become entrenched in a cycle of growing anxiety and more extreme avoidance of situations that elicit it. This set of responses is known as an ‘anxiety cycle’.

Anxiety cycles are maintained because avoidance means that they go unchallenged – in the case of Sarah (below) by not attending school she doesn’t have the opportunity to find that other children do like her or that over time she can learn to manage feeling shaky. Additionally, over time, secondary or maintaining factors can increase feelings of anxiety. These are factors that may not have been an initial trigger but now increase the likelihood that you would want to avoid a situation. Some maintaining factors for children and young people who avoid school are ‘falling behind in their work’ and ‘loss of contact with their friends’.

AN ANXIETY CYCLE IN ACTION:

Sarah has always been a little shy and finds it hard to be in a large group. She has just started a new secondary school. When Sarah enters a room full of students she feels a little sick and shaky. This is really bad if the teacher asks her a question, her voice is wobbly and she feels sweaty.

Sarah starts to worry that other students notice this. She thinks that they won’t like her and that she is stupid for not being able to answer a question.

Sarah starts to feel sick most mornings and to take days off school due to illness. When she is at home she doesn’t feel sick and worried but she wants to be able to go to school like everyone else.

On the days that Sarah does go in she ‘notices’ that other students look at her when she arrives and believes this is because they can see how shaky and sweaty she is. She begins to avoid school more frequently and falls behind in her lessons. Sarah worries that her peers think that she is stupid and that no one likes her and she will never have friends. Over time she begins to avoid other situations in which she is exposed to other young people and spends increasing amounts of time in her room.

What should schools do to reduce EBSA?

To be able to prevent, pre-empt and protect children and young people at risk of EBSA we need to know our children well and be confident in the adjustments and provision required to meet their needs. The following sections are designed for parents and schools to work through together to map the needs of their children. They contain information, online training sessions and activities as well as links to resources and advice produced by external organisations.

The journey for children, young people and families experiencing EBSA can be a traumatic one. It is through working together and developing joint understanding that schools and families can break the cycle of anxiety avoidance and help children and young people to develop resilience in the face of their individual needs.

Practical guidance on managing non-attendance

Using the EBSA toolkit

It is important to highlight that there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to working with pupils experiencing EBSA. It is through robust assessment, collaboration with families and careful provision planning that we can make a difference for children and young people experiencing EBSA. The toolkit has been designed to support schools on this journey and covers the following:

1. Preventative measures
2. Early identification tools
3. Working in collaboration with parents
4. Working with children to understand their EBSA
5. Developing reintegration plans

The process of developing an understanding and planning can take months and even years in some cases. As such, it is important to consider how to meet needs in the shorter term whilst making longer term plans.

Adjustments, support, and provision

Planning to meet the needs of pupils experiencing EBSA should be informed by assessment. Consideration should be given to how needs are met in line with the SEN code of practice. A child who is not able to attend due to emotional reasons and/or because their underlying needs are not being met is likely to require an increase in adjustment, support, or provision. For some children this may be a short-term requirement and for others a sustained change in provision or setting may be required. In line with the SEN Code of Practice schools should identify needs early and there is likely to be a case to place children experiencing EBSA on the SEN register on this basis. The examples below show how schools might meet the needs of EBSA students at different stages within a graduated response.

Examples of reasonable adjustments

- Differentiated learning approaches
- Adjusted expectations in line with emotional needs
- Allowing a child to start a few minutes earlier or later than their class
- Appropriate positioning within the class to reduce the impact of sensory needs
- Allowing a child to sit with a child they have an established relationship with
- Not taking part in an activity or lesson which has been identified as particularly stressful until the child is more able to cope (through intervention or support)

Examples of provision that might be ordinarily available

- Quality first teaching (differentiated learning, extra check-ins with pupil)
- Safe spaces for time out when a child is overwhelmed
- Lunch time clubs away from the busy playground
- Named adults in school for children to talk to about their worries
- Social inclusion provision such as buddying, peer mentoring and structured play

Examples of SEN provision

- Targeted learning interventions (for example, literacy small group work)
- Social skills intervention groups
- Nurture groups or ELSA intervention
- Psychoeducational sessions on anxiety management/relaxation techniques
- A key adult to develop a relationship with the child and scaffold their access to challenging situations

Schools might consider accessing funding through the High Needs Block or through an EHCP if the provision identified is significantly beyond that which is embedded within the school's ordinarily available provision.

EBSA and absence coding

It is the legal duty of parents to ensure that their children receive an education and, where this education is provided in a school, to ensure regular attendance (in accordance with the Education Act, 1996). If a child does not attend school, then it is the school's responsibility to code the absence according to specific codes. Schools must adhere to the Department for Education's advice [Working together to improve school attendance \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/612222/Working_together_to_improve_school_attendance.pdf). The guidance states that schools can authorise absences for limited reasons but does not provide specific guidance for EBSA. Head Teachers have ultimate responsibility for determining whether an absence can be listed as authorised.

Absence due to illness

Schools must record absences as authorised where pupils cannot attend due to illness (both physical and mental health related). For many children experiencing EBSA the significant emotional component might be considered mental ill-health and *could* be authorised on that basis. In the majority of cases a parent's notification that their child is ill can be accepted without question or concern. Schools should **not** routinely request that parents

provide medical evidence to support illness. Schools are advised not to request medical evidence unnecessarily as it places additional pressure on health professionals, their staff, and their appointments system particularly if the illness is one that does not require treatment by a health professional. Only where the school has a genuine and reasonable doubt about the authenticity of the illness should medical evidence be requested to support the absence.

Deciding to code an absence as either authorised or not should lead to clear plans about how to address the needs of the child and the situation they are in. Make sure that you follow your attendance policy and request support from the local authority County Attendance team if you are unsure of your role or responsibilities as a setting.

Absence due to EBSA

As there is no specific guidance for schools on how to manage the absences of children who present with EBSA, Head Teachers must decide whether they agree to authorise an absence as illness in line with the view that a child's absence has a significant emotional element. Decision making should be transparent, based on the best available information and have clear actions linked to *any* chosen code. The questions below are designed to guide schools in their decision making and should be shared with parents to help them understand the situation, the implications for their own responsibilities and what actions will be taken:

1. Does there appear to be an emotional element to the child's avoidance – what signs of emotional distress have been documented or observed in the home and/or the school settings?
2. Do any of the risk factors for developing EBSA (see toolkit) apply to this child?
3. Using the EBSA screening tool (Appendix 1) - are there significant concerns about the child?
4. Is the child avoiding other environments or social situations?
5. Are parents encouraging school attendance/have they in the past?

Answering yes to any of these questions might indicate that EBSA is a reasonable explanation for the young person's attendance at this time. It is important to note that the child 'being fine when they are at home' does not undermine the possibility that they are experiencing debilitating levels of anxiety as removal of an immediate stressor leads to a reduction in anxiety. Similarly, though children may present as 'fine' when they are in school, we should take seriously parental narratives of the emotional needs presenting in the home setting. The ability to mask our emotions in public is a prosocial skill that enables us to behave in line with social norms. It does not necessarily imply that we are able to cope

with the level of emotion experienced over a sustained period of time. Parental concerns are often a key early indicator that a child or young person's needs are not being met.

Provision for longer-term absence

Pupils with long term illness or other health needs may need additional support to continue education, such as alternative provision arranged by the local authority. Local authorities are responsible for arranging suitable education for children of compulsory school age who, because of health reasons, would otherwise not receive suitable education.

To do this the Local Authority (LA) commissions Aspire to provide a medical needs provision for children unable to attend school because of medical needs. It is the responsibility of the school to make a referral to Aspire. For more information please see: [Home tuition and hospital teaching services guidance | Buckinghamshire Council](#)

The LA have overall responsibility for ensuring that provision is made for children who cannot attend due to illness. However, this may involve you as a setting as you may be best placed to make appropriate provision whilst maintaining valuable relationships that might promote attendance in the future. For example, you may consider making the following provision available:

- Using a discrete part of the school (for example, learning support base or other) for the child to access direct teaching if they can engage
- Sending work home with detailed explanation of activities and expectations for completion
- Using google classroom or similar to deliver the above where there is appropriate technology available at home and the child can access it
- 'Face-to-face' online teaching sessions individually or in small groups
- Meeting the child at home to teach or provide emotional support
- Providing home tuition through an external provider

Any medical provision that is put in place should not be considered a long-term solution but a bridge towards eventual reintegration. Continued assessments of needs to ensure appropriate provision will be available before building up to a reintegration plan based on graded exposure principles is essential for children experiencing EBSA to have their needs met in the longer term.

Reduced timetables and EBSA

There is no statutory basis upon which to establish a reduced or part-time timetable. However, in certain circumstances, schools may agree to implement one for a time-limited

period in order to support a pupil who cannot attend school full-time. The aim of a part-time timetable should be to reintegrate a child into full-time provision. Any longer-term arrangements relating to reduced hours can only be considered due to recognised medical needs as outlined above.

A reduced timetable cannot be implemented without written agreement from parents or carers. It should only ever be considered if it is in the best interests of the child and to act as a phased return to the school.

In relation to pupils experiencing EBSA a reduced timetable *might* be useful to allow:

- A period of rest and recovery from significant anxiety. If it is thought that this might be beneficial then it means you think the child has some additional needs and so it should only be put in place as part of a wider strategy of support. Appropriate assessment and planning should continue to happen even if a reduced timetable is in place – for example, allowing the child to spend time engaging with learning mentors, SENCOS or external professionals to understand what is contributing to their situation
- Reasonable adjustment – for example, allowing the child to avoid lessons or elements of the school day they find particularly challenging. During this time school should work towards developing an understanding of what support or provision might be required to reintegrate them into this class/part of the school or consider long term reasonable adjustments or alternatives

A reduced timetable will not:

- Resolve EBSA in itself – we know that avoiding difficult situations can maintain and increase feelings of anxiety.

There must be clear steps towards reintegration (see toolkit) which are based on working towards what the child finds difficult not just the number of hours in school.

EBSA and unauthorised absence

If you have taken the decision to code absences as unauthorised then there is an implication that there are issues to be resolved in the home setting – that is, that parents are not fulfilling their parental obligations or there are unresolved familial difficulties which are a primary barrier to attendance. In this case the school should be taking appropriate action to facilitate support and remove barriers in school and help pupils and parents to access the support they need to overcome the barriers outside of school. This might include an early help or whole family plan where absence is a symptom of wider issues. For more information see [Working together to improve school attendance \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/612222/Working_together_to_improve_school_attendance.pdf)

School responsibilities to children experiencing EBSA

Regardless of whether you record absences as authorised or not, you continue to have clear responsibilities for safeguarding and educational provision. Whilst a child remains on the role of the school you must ensure that you continue to:

- Carry out welfare checks
- Develop an Individual Health Care Plan in partnership with the school, parents, pupils, and any relevant healthcare professional (where appropriate)
- Liaise with outside agencies to ensure that actions are undertaken on your behalf
- Provide educational and other ordinarily available activities
- Monitor progress
- Coordinate SEN provision and review needs at the SEN and EHCP levels

A note on off-rolling

Off-rolling is the practice of removing a pupil from the school roll without using a permanent exclusion, when the removal is primarily in the best interests of the school, rather than the best interests of the pupil. This includes pressuring a parent to remove their child from the school roll. A school cannot legally remove compulsory school-age children from roll, (even if a parent makes the request in writing), unless specific grounds are met as set out in (Deletions from Admission Register in The Education (Pupil Registration) (England) Regulations 2006): [Regulation 8 of Education \(Pupil Registration\) \(England\) Regulations 2006](#)

Advice on absence

For more information please visit:

- [County Attendance Team | SchoolsWeb \(buckscc.gov.uk\)](https://www.buckscc.gov.uk/schoolsweb)

Or contact the Buckinghamshire Council County Attendance Team:
countyattendanceteam@buckinghamshire.gov.uk

Toolkit part 1 – Prevention and Early Identification

There is a strong case for stopping non-attendance before it has begun. Government data consistently demonstrates the link between attendance and attainment with a more than 40% gap in the number of pupils achieving expected standards at GCSE between those with no missed sessions and those who persistently do not attend. The effects are stark across key stages. Additionally, the resources required to reintegrate a child who is already not-attending are colloquially reported to be significantly higher than increasing intervention for a child who is showing signs of EBSA while attending school.

This section of the toolkit highlights ways that schools can develop preventative measures, from auditing the school through monitoring children who are most vulnerable and developing preventative whole school approaches that promote psychological well-being.

Early Identification - Screening the school population

Developing a register of pupils at risk of becoming EBSA would ensure that appropriate preventative measures are put in place before a child's attendance decreases. As EBSA is not a diagnosis there are no standard criteria on which to base any screening of your school population. EBSA describes the behavioural expression of children or young people whose needs are not being sufficiently met. The needs which underpin EBSA can be very varied, and the basis of intervention is centred upon understanding the individual presentation for each case. However, research shows us that there are common risk factors for becoming EBSA at the individual child, family, and school levels.

Risk factors which increase the likelihood of EBSA occurring		
Individual	Family	School
Social anxiety	Parent mental ill health	Learning needs not identified/met
Difficulties with emotional literacy (awareness and regulation)	Siblings being educated at home due to illness or EBSA	Requirement to engage with activities the child can't cope with (for example, talking in front of others, assemblies)
Separation anxiety (current or historic)	Absence of a parent	High noise levels
Worries about home situation/family	Family transitions	Difficulties with peer relationships
Being a young carer	Bereavement and loss	Bullying
Low self-confidence or esteem	Limited social interaction	Poor relationships with staff
Physical illness/health needs	Parents appear easily stressed by child's anxiety/are over-protective	Poor organisation/unpredictability in the child's classroom
Previous exclusions	Conflict/family dynamics	Harsh or unfair consequences from teachers

The EBSA risk screening tool (Appendix 1) could be utilised to identify and maintain a register of children who are vulnerable. This would usefully then be shared with SENCOs and pastoral leads, allowing them to make assessments of underpinning needs and put appropriate adjustments or intervention in place at the point that they first arise.

Prevention – school auditing

It can be helpful to think about how your school meets the needs of those who are at risk of becoming EBSA at the whole system level to reduce the risk of EBSA escalating. There are two tools which you may wish to use to assess this:

- a whole-school audit tool (Appendix 2) which is recommended for senior managers to use as part of their school development planning

- sensory issues can play a large role in school avoidance and using the Autism Education Trust's [sensory audit tool](#) should be considered another useful way of ensuring that your school environment meets needs commonly associated with school avoidance

Whole school approaches to EBSA prevention

As EBSA is not a diagnosis but related to how safe and supported young people feel in school, this means that there are various relevant interventions and approaches which can be adopted at the whole-school level to reduce the risk of a young person developing EBSA.

These following sections are designed to help schools promote emotional wellbeing starting at a whole school level. These are just some of the activities and interventions schools may be able to implement to promote resilience, belongingness, emotional literacy skills, and secure attachments.

Whole school EBSA prevention – The PACE model

PACE' stands for Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity, Empathy. It is an approach established by Dan Hughes that encourages the application of these four personal qualities by staff when supporting children's self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and resilience. PACE focuses on the whole child and is an effective approach for de-escalating conflict and increasing the chance of a child feeling understood.

'Playfulness': having an open, ready, calm, relaxed and engaged attitude. Adopting a playful quality when working with children and young people helps to keep things in perspective as well as create a fun and light atmosphere. This could be achieved through using a 'story-telling' tone of voice and should then reduce angry and defensive responses from children.

'Acceptance': fostering a culture of unconditional acceptance of children's thoughts, feelings, and perceptions without judgement. This doesn't mean always agreeing with a child's interpretation but accepting their feelings about it and emphasising that it's ok to feel the way they do.

'Curiosity': seeking to understand what is driving children's behaviour in an accepting way that reduces the risk of quick judgement. This could be done by asking questions and using a calm tone of voice. Children should still be clear on boundaries, but adults can still convey their intentions as being to help the child rather than lecture them.

'Empathy': put yourself in the child's shoes and allow yourself to feel what they must be feeling. This is not about providing reassurance but about being with them and containing difficult big emotions. This lays the foundation for enhancing connections and provides comfort and support. This is different from expressing sympathy and requires accessing difficult emotions within yourself to truly empathise.

For more information about PACE please visit: <https://ddpnetwork.org/about-ddp/meant-pace/>

Whole school EBSA prevention – Restorative approaches

Many children and young people who experience EBSA have experienced bullying or a breakdown of relationships with peers or teachers. Restorative approaches provide schools with a range of practices which promote mutually respectful relationships, manage behaviour and conflict, address bullying, absences, and build community cohesion. Restorative approaches offer a framework to build upon existing good practice. There is a wealth of evidence that shows how the use of restorative approaches alongside Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL), helps to develop more resilient and self-regulating learners, thus creating positive learning environments.

A restorative school is one which takes a restorative approach to resolving conflict and preventing harm. Restorative approaches enable those who have been harmed to convey the impact of the harm to those responsible, and for those responsible to acknowledge this impact and take steps to put it right.

To be effective, restorative approaches must be in place across the school. This means all pupils, staff (including non-teaching staff), management and the wider school community must understand what acting restoratively means and how they can do it. As a result, restorative schools adopt a whole-school approach to restorative methods.

For more information on promoting restorative approaches in your primary or secondary school please visit the Restorative Justice Council website for useful videos and resources: [Restorative practice in schools | Restorative Justice Council](#)

Whole school EBSA prevention – Belongingness

Helping children and young people to feel part of their school community acts as a buffer to the risk factors for becoming EBSA. The Tree of Life activity is one that all schools can use during PSHE or form tutor time to explore and celebrate individual experiences and develop a sense of belonging.

Information on how to draw the tree of life can be found in Appendix 3.

Whole school EBSA prevention – Whole School Nurture



The concept of nurture relates to the importance of the social environment on the development of emotional well-being. Children who have a good start in life are known to have significant advantages and are also more likely to attend frequently compared to those who have experienced missing or distorted attachments. A whole school approach to Nurture embraces the idea that teachers can help children to develop the social skills they need to thrive, and the confidence and resilience to deal with whatever life throws at

them – not just at school, but for the rest of their lives.

Buckinghamshire schools can receive training in Nurture and access supervision for Nurture practitioners through the ISEND Educational Psychologists.

For more information about Nurture principles and developing a whole school approach to Nurture, please visit: [Whole-School Approach to Nurture - NurtureUK](#)

Whole school EBSA prevention – Trauma informed practices

Many children and young people experiencing EBSA will have experienced some form of trauma, particularly those where the third function of EBSA (to avoid separation from the home or caregivers) is core to their avoidance. In an educational context, trauma-informed practice is a strengths-based framework in which schools and staff understand, recognise, and respond effectively to the impact of trauma on pupils (Quadara and Hunter 2016; Craig 2016). Trauma-informed practice should be practised as a whole school approach with a focus on consistent and predictable strategies that emphasise the importance of relating to the experiences of others. There is no single, proven model for successfully implementing trauma-informed practice in educational settings. However, researchers and practitioners commonly suggest the following interrelated strategies can be useful in supporting the wellbeing and learning of all students, particularly those impacted by trauma:

- Ensuring physical and emotional safety for students and staff
- Respect for diversity, including different cultures, historical backgrounds, and genders
- Positive relationships, particularly focused on trustworthiness, consistency, and predictability
- Empowerment of students, including taking a strengths-based approach. (SAMHSA 2014; AIFS 2016; Van der Kolk 2005; Craig 2016; Kezelman 2014; AIHW 2013)

Buckinghamshire schools can access training on Trauma Informed Practices through the Virtual School.

For more information about implementing whole school approaches and strategies please see: [Trauma informed practice in schools \(nsw.gov.au\)](https://www.nsw.gov.au/trauma-informed-practice)

For information about the 3 R's model for supporting children who have experienced trauma to be able to learn, useful resources can be found on the Beacon House website:

- [The Three R's \(beaconhouse.org.uk\)](https://www.beaconhouse.org.uk/the-three-rs)
- [Resources \(beaconhouse.org.uk\)](https://www.beaconhouse.org.uk/resources)

Whole school EBSA prevention – Emotional Literacy skill development

Emotional literacy is a term used to describe a number of skills that underpin emotional regulation including:

- Recognising emotional states
- Understanding and labelling emotions
- Being able to express our emotional experiences to others
- Regulating our bodily responses to emotions

PSHE sessions should focus on these elements of emotional literacy but could be usefully extended into ordinarily available provision for children who may need more targeted support. Investing in training for staff to lead on emotional literacy skills may have a positive impact for children and young people at risk of becoming EBSA as it focusses on the management of the uncomfortable feelings that elicit avoidance behaviour. The ELSA (Emotional Literacy Support Assistant) intervention developed by Sheila Burton was designed to enhance the capacity of schools to support the emotional needs of pupils within their own school settings. Designated teaching assistants are taught to develop and implement personalised support programmes for pupils identified as needing further support with their emotions. The training and supervision ELSAs receive is provided by Educational Psychologists. Schools in Buckinghamshire can access training and ongoing supervision for ELSAs through the ISEND Educational Psychologists.

For more information about ELSA please visit: [About ELSA – ELSA Network](https://www.elsanetwork.co.uk/about-elsa)

For further information about whole school approaches to emotional literacy please visit: [Emotionally Healthy Schools.](https://www.emotionallyhealthyschools.co.uk)

Whole school EBSA prevention – Emotion coaching

At the core of EBSA for many young people is their skills in recognising and managing their emotions. Emotion Coaching uses moments of heightened emotion and resulting behaviour to guide and teach the child or young person about more effective responses. Through empathetic engagement, the child's emotional state is verbally acknowledged and validated, promoting a sense of security, and feeling 'felt'. This activates changes in the child's neurological system and allows the child to calm down, physiologically and psychologically.

For more information on how to use emotion coaching in your setting please visit: [Emotion Coaching - United Kingdom \(emotioncoachinguk.com\)](https://www.emotioncoachinguk.com)

Whole school EBSA prevention – Promotion of emotional well being

THRIVE is a leading provider of support for children and young people's social and emotional development. Their whole-school approach to wellbeing has evidence to support it can improve attendance, behaviour, and attainment.

The THRIVE Approach consists of:

1. Thrive-Online™ (tol): a web-based profiling, action-planning and progress monitoring tool enabling you to ensure the best outcome for each child or group.
2. Thrive training: focusing on the emotional needs of different age groups, informed by established neuroscience and attachment research, as well as child development studies and research into risk and resilience factors.

For more information, please visit their website: [The Thrive Approach to social and emotional wellbeing | The Thrive Approach](https://www.thriveapproach.co.uk)

Toolkit part 2 – Identification and Early Intervention

The following sections outline the steps to take identifying the needs of children and young people experiencing EBSA to make early interventions and reduce an escalation in their EBSA. It outlines the importance of working collaboratively with parents before going on to offer practical strategies for working with children and young people directly.

Working with Parents – Creating a shared narrative of EBSA

Understanding parental experiences

Parents of children experiencing EBSA may have experienced a long and challenging journey to getting the support that they need. They may have faced daily battles in getting their child to school, worry that they are causing trauma to their child by insisting on attendance and feel let down by professionals who have failed to acknowledge the level of stress in the child and the family system.

It is important that we recognise this as professionals because close partnership working and consistency in approach are fundamental to being able to make changes for children experiencing EBSA. Parents must be involved and in agreement with support and reintegration plans for their children. Family stress and parental anxiety is often high when a child does not attend school and can undermine even the best plans for reintegration. If a parent shows verbally or non-verbally or through avoidance that they cannot cope with their child and their presentation of EBSA then a child is likely to have the same or similar anxieties and will be reinforced. Therefore, to support parents we should:

- Listen to the parents/ carers
- Acknowledge that the parents/ carers are important people in supporting their child return to school
- Empower parents to see a way forward for their child
- Educate parents about anxiety and EBSA
- Ensure parents feel supported – put them in touch with other parents to gain support

Individual EBSA formulation

The first step to developing a successful intervention is to build a picture of the individual child's EBSA, being inquisitive about their school history and the picture of needs in settings other than in school. This information should be used as a foundation to build an EBSA formulation which sets out the individual presentation and needs which underpin it for each child (a tool to aid your formulation is in Appendix 4). Over time you will of course need to

ensure that the pupil voice is part of your formulation, and the next section of the toolkit focusses on engaging children in understanding their EBSA. However, it is often sensible to start this discussion with parents and carers as they may be more willing to engage and be able to help us to understand how the needs have developed over time.

Beginning the EBSA formulation

[EBSA history](#)

The first section of the EBSA formulation begins with a history. Invite parents or carers to a discussion and ask them to talk about how their child has experienced school over time, since their early years. Be open and curious, ask questions that will help you to understand the functions of the avoidance (see the 4 functions of EBSA – link to section 3). Try and ask questions which explore the child's world beyond the doors of the school as well as within it. Here are some example questions that you might use to help you explore the history:

- Tell me about when ____ first started school.
- How does ____ feel about school, when did you first notice any concerns?
- How does ____ cope with the expectations of school, for example how to behave, homework, exams? How has this changed over time?
- Does ____ have friends in school? Are there ever any difficulties in their friendships? Have their friendships been stable across the school years?
- Does ____ happily separate from you? Has this always been the same? Is this true in other contexts? When is it easier/harder?
- Are there other places/activities/environments that your child struggles with?
- Are there any contexts/activities/places where ____ is comfortable and confident?
- What does ____ do when they are at home? How is their behaviour/are their emotions different? Where and when are they most relaxed? Has this always been the case?

Use the formulation document to record your initial consultation and begin to map out any underlying needs which are already apparent in the formulation table. Don't forget to return to the history over time though. It may be that your understanding develops the more you work with the child and the family.

[Triggering Events and Maintaining factors](#)

During your discussion with parents look out for triggering events and maintaining factors. These are things which might not have 'caused the EBSA' in isolation but which may have

led to an increase in avoidance behaviours, or which are a barrier to the child returning. For example:

- John has always found going to school difficult, but things got really difficult in year 3. His teacher told him off in front of the class for ‘messaging around’ and he still worries about that today.
- Jainab has always been a high achiever but now she really worries about how far behind she is and worries that people will think she is stupid.

Tools for working with parents

You may also find it helpful either before or after this initial discussion to use tools which can help you to further explore the individual needs underpinning a child’s EBSA. There are various tools available online and below.

[The School Refusal Scale:](#)

The school refusal scale is a self-report scale that parent’s fill out to identify factors that may be contributing to emotional based school avoidance (EBSA). It is a 24-item measure with 6 items devoted to each function. (Not sure if a weblink or download is best here? [School Refusal Assessment Scale Revised \(SRAS-R\) \(arabpsychology.com\)](#)) You may want to manage the language used before sharing this resource with parents and acknowledge that we no longer advocate use of the term ‘refusal’.

[Worry time and worry diaries:](#)

Ask parents to sit down with their child once a day for a week and talk about what worries them when they think about school. This information may help to identify fears that may need attention and any needs that could underpin them.

In appendix 5 you will find a handout about worries and how to talk to children about them.

[Risk and resilience:](#)

Psychology research tells us that some children and young people are more likely to experience mental health needs including the anxiety that is common in EBSA. Examining the risks in a child or young person’s life can help us to understand where support might be needed but examining potential protective factors also helps us to understand the child or young person’s capacity for resilience. Protective factors can provide a buffering experience to the negative ones in a child’s life. It is also thought that certain skills can be taught which might promote resilience.

You may like to watch this video which explains risk and resilience: [In Brief: The Science of Resilience](#)

Use the chart below to talk to parents about the risks to their child's mental health and to help everyone to understand the protective factors that either are present or could be explored further as part of your action planning.

Risk Factors		
Family history of MH needs	Family breakdown/stress	Bullying
Learning difficulties	Parental substance misuse	Discrimination
Communication difficulties	Abuse	Friendship issues
Physical illness	Parental criminality	Poor relationships with teachers
Low attainment	Death/loss in family	Deviant peer influences
Low self-esteem		
Child	Family	School
Secure attachments	Family stability/harmony	Schools' environment which enhances belonging/connectedness
Good communication skills	Supportive parents	Clear policies on behaviour and bullying
Experiences of success in school or elsewhere	Strong family values	Whole-school approach to promoting good mental health
Capacity to reflect	Consistent discipline	Having friends in school and/or at home
Sense of control	Support for education	
	Support from extended family/friend network	
Resilience factors		

Working with children – establishing a rapport

Trust before truth

Most children who experience EBSA do want to attend school, but they don't have the knowledge of how to do it. To be able to help we need to ensure that we have a clear understanding of the individual needs and barriers to attending. It may be difficult for a child or young person to understand for themselves why they find attending difficult. It is up to us as professionals to be detectives and to help children and young people uncover the true reasons as to why they can't attend.

A child experiencing EBSA may have strong negative feelings about school and adults who work within a school. They can often feel like they are being judged, or that adults don't believe what they say and how they feel. Before we begin to explore an individual's EBSA profile we need to ensure that we have developed a trusting relationship with them. EBSA protects an individual from experiencing painful emotions. They may not feel ready to think about changing their behaviours and see answering questions about their EBSA as a threat to their coping strategy. It is therefore essential to invest heavily in rapport building before moving onto exploration of a child or young person's EBSA.

Establishing a rapport – basic communication principles

3 elements of communication

To build a rapport with a child it is important to understand how to effectively communicate with a child both verbally and non-verbally. There are 3 elements to communication, which are essential to understand when building a rapport with a child or young person with EBSA, these include:

- Body language
- Voice
- Words

It is important to understand that our body language, for example our posture, movements and facial expressions make up 55% of how we communicate (Conciliation Skills, SCRIP, 2002), our tone of voice makes up 38% of our communication, with spoken language making up only 7%. Although our body language is the most important, it is essential that all 3 elements deliver a positive message.

Things you should avoid:

- Speaking too loudly or shouting
- The use of patronising language
- The use of negative language
- Asking children to identify and speak about their anxieties without getting to know them
- Being continuously unavailable to communicate or support the pupil
- Identifying the child's weaknesses
- Highlighting their negative behaviour/ or their wrong choices.

- Speaking to the child or young person about personal issues in a non-confidential space
- Offloading your own emotions onto the child when you communicate
- Displaying disinterest when communicating with the child

Things you should do:

- Build a relationship with the child
- Find a suitable time to check in with the child
- The use of a safe space used for communicating
- Having an unconditional positive regard
- Use a sensitive communication style
- Use curious language to understand their situation, for example, I wonder why you are feeling like that
- Be empathetic and sympathetic to their behaviour and situation
- Use effective eye contact
- Use effective body language to communicate

Matching and mirroring

Matching and mirroring is a way of assuming another person's style of behaviour which enables us to build rapport with another person.

When we match the way a child or young person is communicating and mirror or copy what they do then it shows we respect them, it is a way of listening with our whole body and shows we are present in the interaction. We can fully understand them and are able to reassure them.

We may match our verbal and non-verbal communication to theirs through using the same:

(Civico, 2015):

- **Body Posture and Gestures:** It is important to try and match the child's behaviour, what are they doing with their arms or their hands. If the child or young person is reserved and is not using their hands to communicate, then to use your hands as an adult communicating may seem excessive.

- **The Rhythm of Breath:** Observe how the young person is breathing and where they are breathing from and try to match this.
- **The Energy Level:** Is the child or young person shy or extroverted? If they are reserved and you are full of energy the child may observe this as aggressive. So, it's important to attempt to match their energy level to establish an effective rapport.
- **The Tone of Your Voice:** If the child or young person is whispering and talking calmly, it would be inappropriate to speak loudly.

Barriers to communication

There are lots of barriers to communication with children and young people. Below are 3 main barriers.

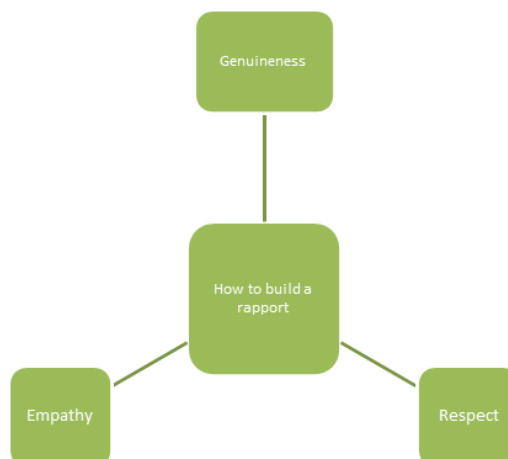
Judging – being critical of the child. A child may be very critical of themselves and display many negative thinking errors, however it is important that we do not reinforce this and instead we should show an understanding of their experience.

Avoiding the child's concerns – It is important we listen to a child's concerns first without jumping into reassurance straight away. Give the child enough time to speak about how they are feeling.

Sending Solutions – Don't always think that you have the answers to everything. Avoid giving them solutions to problems, it is important for them to come up with their own and to let them have agency over this, otherwise children won't progress and can take a backwards step, if they feel like a goal or something to work towards is too hard.

Establishing a rapport – Psychological principles

To build an effective rapport with a child, there are three psychological factors it is important to convey: genuineness, respect, and empathy.



Genuineness

Being genuine means being yourself, it will help to build up a rapport with a child. To be genuine, you should:

- Remain open and non-defensive (even if you are threatened).
- Be yourself and don't come across as too professional, be relaxed around the child.
- Be consistent with your own values and your own behaviours.
- Do not change your attitude toward them despite their challenging behaviour.

Respect

Being respectful means having due regard for somebody's feelings, emotions, and rights.

To be respectful you should:

- Show that you care about the wellbeing of the child.
- Show that by working with children it's worth your time and energy.
- Maintain confidentiality – don't overshare with people if there were certain things, they wanted just you to know (unless it is a safeguarding concern, in which case it must be shared).

Empathy

Empathy is about communicating understanding so that we can relate to a child's feelings. We should be able to step into their shoes and see things from their perspective. Adults working with children and young people with EBSA should show that you are able to understand their:

- Experiences
- Behaviours
- Feelings

Establishing a rapport – skills

Beginning conversation basics

Make sure that you:

- Provide a **consistent safe space** to work with the child or young person.
- Stick to agreed meeting times and length of sessions.

- **Confidentiality**– only share information with other people if it is essential, for example a potential safeguarding issue. Make sure the child understands what will and won't be shared and with whom.
- Think about how to end sessions. If a child is in an emotional state or has engaged deeply in reflective conversation then they may need a buffer between the end of the session and returning to the classroom (for example, a walk, a game). Plan time for this.

Active listening

Active 'whole body' listening means being able to give all of your attention to someone else. It is the ability to keep your attention external to yourself rather than thinking through your own thoughts.' (Conciliation Skills, SCRIP, 2002). It helps a person to feel listened to, validated and understood.

Active listening includes:

1. Using your whole body to convey your listening (eye contact, using non-verbal cues such as 'uh-huh or nodding, adjusting body language to mirror or match the speaker).
2. Reflecting back the emotions that you hear or might anticipate (for example, "I can see that made you feel really angry" or "I am wondering whether that worried you at all?")
3. Asking open ended questions to extend understanding and avoiding closed questions ("I wonder how that made you feel?", "tell me more about ____").
4. Paraphrase to check you have understood ("I think you are telling me that the teacher was mistaken when they told you off, is that right?").
5. Summarise and prompt the child to think about what they need ("it seems that you really struggle to feel part of the class, I wonder if you have thought about what could change?")

Working with children – exploring individual EBSA

By now you should have established sufficient rapport with the child/young person and their family. You are ready to begin exploring their specific avoidance pattern and to think about the needs the underpin the behaviour. There are lots of different activities and tools that you may already be familiar with which would suit this purpose – any activity which encourages the child to make a connection between their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours or which explores how they feel about themselves and their experiences. However, it is important to remember that some children find the level of reflective thinking and

introspection required to be a challenge. Some children and young people may simply not know why they avoid certain situations and contexts. It may be that using a variety of tools and question over time is required before we can begin to understand the individual EBSA presentation.

Below is a list of activities, tools, and resources that you may find helpful to understand a child's individual barriers to attendance.

Anxiety scaling

You can use various different visual representations of a scale to help you in exploring a child's avoidance hierarchy. The aim is to determine the variables that lead to anxiety and to rank them according to the level of anxiety or likely avoidance a child experiences.

Ladders, thermometers, ice bergs, mountains and smiley/sad faces could all be reproduced to do this activity (see example thermometer below). You may need to scaffold the activity by listing different situations in case the child/young person finds it hard to spontaneously suggest some. For example:

- Being in an empty classroom
- Putting my uniform on
- Getting out of bed
- Sitting next to another child in my class
- Playtime]
- Being in the lunch hall
- Specific lessons (maths, drama, PE)
- Talking to my teacher
- When the teacher asks a question/for hands up



You may want to write situations on a piece of paper and cut them up so that you can sequence them together. You may need several scales (for example, one about interacting with teachers, one about different parts of the school, one about friendships).

The Incredible 5-Point Scale

The Incredible 5-point Scale is a resource that can be used to structure conversations and strategies relating to a child's emotional world. It can be used to explore a range of emotions systematically and helps children to think about emotions that they may struggle to name by using numerical scales linked to emotions and the situations that they arise in. The scale can be accessed in the book referenced below and some downloadable resources are freely available on the author's website:

Book reference: The Incredible 5-Point Scale: Assisting Students in Understanding Social Interactions and Managing their Emotional Responses Paperback – 16 Dec. 2021 by [Kari Dunn Buron](#) (Author), [Mitzi Curtis](#) (Author).

Website: [Downloadables - THE INCREDIBLE 5-POINT SCALE \(5pointscale.com\)](https://5pointscale.com/)

The Blob People

The Blob people were created by Pip Wilson as a way of exploring the emotional world of children as young as 4 years of age. The Blobs are genderless, colourless, culture non-specific representations of people displaying a range of emotions and behaviours across different contexts. They can be used to elicit conversations with a child which might open up their inner world without placing pressure on them to answer more direct reflective questions.

Pip Wilson's website has links to books which can be purchased as well as those that can be downloaded for free: [What Are The Blobs? A Feelosophy | blobshop \(blobtree.com\)](#)

The Blob Tree is a classic resource which can be used as a starting point. Present the child with the picture and ask open, curious questions such as: which blob is most like you; which blob do other people (your mum/teacher) think it like you; which would you like to be? Explore further using exploratory questions like 'why' and 'what would need to happen before that could be true'. You may also want to ask them to think about other people in their lives and which Blobs are most like them. You might then build up to using more targeted Blob pictures such as those in the Blob school or parts of the community to deepen understanding of their emotional experiences in different contexts.

School mosaics and anxiety landscapes

It is important to consider the physical environment as well as the social interactional environment as a factor in a child's EBSA. Simple activities to explore how the child feels in different places can help you to understand how sensory experiences underpin anxiety. For some children a negative sensory experience may be sufficient to lead to avoidance outright (for example, not being able to go into the lunch hall because the noise causes them

extreme discomfort). For other children a specific environment may lead to lower-level physiological arousal which might reduce their capacity to manage other stressors in the environment (for example, the smell in the science lab may cause them discomfort which is distracting and may mean they are more likely to find the stress of learning a challenging subject unmanageable). A child or young person may find it difficult to articulate whether it is the social or physical environment that they find difficult. Mapping and mosaic activities are a starting point to identifying 'triggers' or 'hot spots' and then can be used to experiment further (for example, being in the environment with and without other people present to determine the level of stress elicited in each scenario). Instructions for a mosaic approach can be found in appendix 6.

School Well-being cards

The School Well-being cards have been created by Educational Psychologist Dr Jerrica Holder and may be used as a resource to generate the views of a pupil experiencing EBSA to better understand the reasons why they are struggling to attend school. The cards are divided into risk factors that have been shown to increase the likelihood of EBSA and protective resilience factors which make school attendance more likely. Risk factors are identified by asking the child to sort the yellow risk cards into piles that they agree are true and not at all true about them before choosing the top 5 that are true about them. Resilience factors are identified by sorting the blue cards in the same way before choosing the top 5 they would most like to change.

These can then be used to inform action planning alongside the child and their support network. This can help supporting adults to intervene and make adaptations that will hopefully reduce EBSA behaviours and increase the child's attendance and general wellbeing.

Available at: [School Wellbeing Risk and Resilience Card Set \(schoolwellbeingcards.co.uk\)](https://schoolwellbeingcards.co.uk)

'RAG' Rating Systems

RAG (Red-Amber-Green) ratings, also known as 'traffic lighting,' are often used to summarise indicator values, where green represents a 'favourable' value, red an 'unfavourable' value and amber a 'neutral' value. When working with children experiencing EBSA, this can be applied to children's timetables as a method of supporting the child with EBSA to gradually increase their school attendance.

To do this, a key adult that supports the child should work with the child to identify any days of the school week or lessons on their timetable that they feel more comfortable attending, such as lessons with a particular teacher or peer. These can be coloured as 'green' days or lessons in which the child agrees to attend. The other days or lessons can then be coloured 'amber' which signifies that they may be able to attend them with support, and 'red' meaning they do not feel able to attend at the moment and will need more time and

support to eventually attend. This can help provide goals for the child to aim for and a sense of progress in being able to attend some school or lessons. It also helps the staff supporting the child to understand when to encourage the child to attend and when to provide other forms of support.

The RAG ratings can then be reviewed on a regular basis with the aim that over time more days or lessons will become 'green', and the child is able to increase their attendance and maintain an element of choice and control over their anxiety.

Function of School Avoidance – Card sort

This card sort activity has been devised by Sheffield EPS and shared by Lancashire EPS in their [guidance](#) as a tool to support staff to develop a greater understanding of a young person's school avoidance. It is based on the School Refusal Assessment Scale developed by Kearney (2002). The statements are colour-coded to indicate the function of the school avoidance behaviour as identified by Kearney and Silverman (1990). To understand why a child is exhibiting EBSA behaviours, these cards may be a useful tool in a 1:1 session with the child or young person and a trusted adult. Hopefully by asking the child to sort the statements it can aide conversations around what function EBSA behaviour has for them. As a result, it may be easier to identify appropriate strategies to support them overcome barriers to attending school full time.

Toolkit part 3 – designing a reintegration plan

Before thinking about a reintegration plan you should have begun working through the various resources within the toolkit to:

1. Create a shared narrative with the child's parents
2. Establish a rapport with the child
3. Map out their preferred future and their aspirations
4. Establish the risk and protective factors for the child
5. Understand the factors underpinning their individual EBSA

Designing a successful reintegration plan is contingent on us having a good enough understanding of what underpins an individual child's EBSA. A good reintegration plan:

- Is child-led and reinforced by parents/carers and school
- Is informed by what the child finds difficult and not necessarily by timetables or other contextual restrictions
- Progresses methodically from what the child finds the least to the most difficult
- Has small enough steps for habituation to occur before progressing
- Is supplemented by direct teaching and practice of anxiety management techniques

The following sections will outline the underpinning psychological theories and ideas that should inform reintegration planning and offers tools for its design and implementation.

Understanding the Psychology of reintegration planning

Psychology research tells us that graded exposure is highly effective in increasing an individual's ability to cope with activities and situations that elicit anxiety or fear. The Educational Psychologists advocate for using graded exposure as a tool for supporting young people presenting with EBSA to reintegrate into school.

The following sections are designed to increase your understanding of the psychological theories and techniques associated with graded exposure. They should inform your planning for reintegration or be used to trouble-shoot plans that are not progressing as expected.

What is graded exposure?

If you have designed a reintegration plan before, then you probably already based it on the principles of graded exposure – building up slowly from something manageable to

something that is more difficult. Graded exposure is the process of systematically and gradually exposing an individual to the situations that cause them emotional distress. It relies on the process of habituation to gradually develop tolerance of increasingly challenging situations.

What is habituation?

The aim of all graded exposure plans is to allow habituation to occur. Habituation is a very simple and universal form of learning. It is when your central nervous system reduces its response to a stimulus over time. In everyday terms you might think of it as ‘becoming accustomed’ to a situation or a stimulus. Consider the following examples of habituation:

- You jump into a swimming pool, and it feels freezing at first but after a couple of minutes you stop noticing.
- You put perfume on in the morning and it smells really strong but then you can’t smell it after a few minutes.
- You are working in a room full of people and at first you can hear everything others are saying but over time you manage to ‘tune it out’.

When designing a graded exposure plan, we are aiming for the initial fear/emotional response to a situation to habituate in a similar way to the simple sensory examples above. We want the child or young person to experience the relief of their intense feelings diminishing and over time and for them to ‘become accustomed’ to reasonable levels of anxiety or sensory stimulation (see ‘safety in graded exposure’).

How does habituation occur?

Habituation can occur naturally through repeated exposure to a situation or stimulus. However, it is important to know that some factors impact on the likelihood of it occurring:

- **Changing the stimulus** - if the duration or intensity of the stimulus or situation changes then you may get a recurrence of the original response. For example, where there has been some initial success, we might be tempted to ask the child to stay longer than the agreed 10 minutes or to come to the playground after being in the classroom. This may reduce the likelihood of habituation occurring and leave the child in a heightened state of anxiety at the end of the exposure. It is important therefore not to change the agreed step.
- **Duration** – if a stimulus or situation is not experienced for a long period of time then you may see a full-strength reaction when it is encountered again. For example, we may have successfully habituated a child or young person to ‘talk in front of the class’ and then this does not occur for several weeks so the next time they are asked they experience a spike in anxiety. It is important therefore to regularly work on

target situations that the child or young person experiences. Also – we should be mindful that graded exposure plans that have been successful may need to be repeated following extended absences, such as following the school holidays.

- **Frequency** - the more frequently a stimulus or situation is experienced the quicker habituation will be. This is important when planning your reintegration. Working daily on a smaller target is more likely to affect rapid change than less frequent exposure schedules.
- **Intensity** – if a stimulus is very intense and leads to an extreme emotional response then it is possible that habituation will not occur (just think of an alarm – we don't habituate to noises like that as they are too intense, uncomfortable, and frightening). Understanding the situations or contexts in which the child or young person experiences the most anxiety is essential to building a plan which allows habituation to occur at the lower stages before tackling situations that might require more active management for habituation to occur or which might require continued avoidance in the short term (see a 'psychological safety').

The avoidance hierarchy

A good graded-exposure plan should work systematically from situations or contexts that are lower intensity (that is, provoke the least emotional response) to those which are higher in intensity. This maximises the likelihood that habituation will occur. An avoidance hierarchy is an emotion-based ranking of situations, contexts, or places that a child or young person finds challenging and should be used as a basis for graded exposure planning.

Psychological safety in graded exposure

It is important to understand that reintegration and graded exposure require a young person to experience **small** levels of discomfort before habituation occurs. Their avoidance behaviours are protecting them from unwanted and sometimes scary emotions and feelings. We must be mindful of this and ensure that we are asking something that we believe to be manageable. Parents and advocates for SEN frequently raise concerns that graded exposure might mean asking a child to abandon their psychological defences and learn to accept situations that carry unreasonable expectations. This is **not** the aim of graded exposure. Consider the following examples:

- A young person is being bullied by children in their maths class
- A child with ASC experiences high levels of discomfort in response to the noise in the school hall

In both situations we must ensure that we have addressed the needs before considering exposing the child to them. In the first case we would need to ensure that the bullying had been addressed and some reparation work undertaken before working towards attending

maths lessons. In the second case there would need to be discussion around short term reasonable adjustments, equipment, or management techniques in place. There should also be explicit discussion around the longer-term benefits of going into the hall before deciding whether it *should* be included within the reintegration plan (for example, is it likely that the level of discomfort will reduce over time, is it reasonable to take away the requirement of being in the hall, will this be forever, does this have any negative consequences for the child). We must only ask children and young people to do what we believe to be **safe** and **adequately supported** for their own safety and well-being. In addition to concerns about safety, exposure to a very intense stimulus will not lead to habituation and will undermine the success of a reintegration plan.

Planning reintegration using graded exposure

Uncovering the situations that lead to avoidance

It may be possible to build a hierarchy through simple discussion and mind-mapping with the child or young person – for example, by asking them about the things that they find hard in school. However, some children and young people may not be able to articulate their feelings, and some may not be able to accurately identify them. The toolkit details various activities which could be undertaken with the child or young person and their family to explore the situations, places and contexts that cause them anxiety. If you have not already done so, then please refer to the exploring individual EBSA section of the toolkit.

Building the avoidance hierarchy



Once you have a list of situations or places, you can begin to work with the child or young person to grade them – that is, put them into a hierarchy. You may find it helpful to use visual tools to do this such as a ladder, thermometer, or pyramid (see picture). Encourage the child or young person to give a fear or anxiety rating to each level and keep adjusting the hierarchy until they feel it reflects what they experience.

It is important to consider the possibility that you will need multiple avoidance hierarchies to capture the number of situations that the child or young person's avoidance currently protects them from (for example, if the simple act of putting on uniform in the morning is very anxiety provoking, there may be many steps from there to being in a classroom).

It is also possible that some steps within the hierarchy will require sub-hierarchies. For example, if 'going into my Drama class' is one step on the ladder you may need another ladder that breaks it down into multiple steps within that situation. For example:

- being in the empty drama studio
- walking into the room when the class are already there
- finding a place to sit
- the time before the teacher starts when my classmates are chatting
- warm up exercises and games
- writing down ideas
- working in pairs
- working in small groups
- acting in front of the whole class
- answering the teacher's questions

Teaching children and young people to understand their experience

Helping children and young people to understand the functions of anxiety, how it is maintained and how to manage it (see below) can be helpful to reduce the feelings of hopelessness that so many young people experience in their situation. You may want to show them the following resources to help you when talking to children and young people about their EBSA and how it will be addressed:

- [School is not my enemy](#)
- [The Happiness Trap – understanding the functions of anxiety](#)
- [CAMHS resources on understanding anxiety and management](#)

Using anxiety management tools to facilitate habituation

In some situations, the response to a situation may be too significant for habituation to occur rapidly. Actively teaching children and young people techniques that can help to dissipate the thoughts and feelings associated with anxiety is helpful. Such techniques can increase the likelihood that habituation occurs and can also help them the child or young person feel that they have some control over their responses. It is recommended therefore that as part of your reintegration planning there is time allocated to teaching anxiety management techniques. Then, once the child or young person is ready to increase their exposure to more challenging situations, they will have strategies already in place that they can employ. It is important to consider developmental levels as well as the capacity to put such strategies in place in the moment. It may be that as part of the reintegration plan the child or young person is accompanied by an adult who is able to co-regulate (that is to step

them through the strategies that they need to employ) to increase the likelihood of habituation occurring.

You will find information about potential strategies for anxiety management on the following websites. You may also find other suggested activities online. Be creative and explore a range of strategies to help the child or young person find those that work for them as an individual.

- Deep breathing activities and progressive muscle relaxation (suitable for all ages): [Relaxation Exercises | Young Scot](#)
- Guided meditation exercises (older children and adults): [\(83\) Headspace - YouTube](#)
- Mindfulness and yoga for younger children: [\(83\) Cosmic Kids Yoga - YouTube](#)
- Deep breathing, mindful colouring, yoga and other activities from the Anna Freud Centre: [Coronavirus: resources for managing anxiety and improving wellbeing toolkit #4 : Mentally Healthy Schools](#)
- Self-care ideas and resources: [Self Care, Anxiety, Depression, Coping Strategies | On My Mind | Anna Freud Centre](#)

Appendix

Appendix 1: EBSA Risk Screening Tool

Pupil name:

Year group:

SEN level:

Pupil premium:

Risk factors which increase the likelihood of EBSA occurring			
		Identified?	More information needed?
Child	Social anxiety		
	Difficulties with emotional literacy (awareness and regulation)		
	Separation anxiety (current or historic)		
	Worries about home situation/family		
	Being a young carer		
	Low self-confidence or esteem		
	Physical illness/health needs		
	Previous exclusions		
Notes			
Home	Parent mental ill health		
	Siblings being educated at home due to illness or EBSA		

	Absence of a parent		
	Family transitions		
	Bereavement and loss		
	Limited social interaction		
	Parents appear easily stressed by child's anxiety/are over-protective		
	Conflict/family dynamics		
Notes			
School	Learning needs not identified/met		
	Requirement to engage with activities the child can't cope with (for example, talking in front of others, assemblies)		
	High noise levels		
	Difficulties with peer relationships		
	Bullying		
	Poor relationships with staff		
	Poor organisation/unpredictability in the child's classroom		
	Harsh or unfair consequences from teachers		
Notes			

Action planning:

Appendix 2: Whole School Audit Tool

Whole school systems for promotion of emotional well-being and prevention of EBSA				
		Provision identified (Y/N)?	Description of intervention/provision	Next steps (who/when)
School Culture and Ethos	Emotional wellbeing is seen as everyone's responsibility across the continuum from development of strengths and wellbeing to targeted intervention.			
	In-house continuing professional development includes emotional wellbeing topics (including EBSA) on a regular basis.			
	Pupil voice is valued, and pupils are encouraged to actively participate in the school's development plan.			
	Parents are seen as partners in working with school and other agencies to resolve challenges.			
	Quality first teaching includes appropriate differentiation of the curriculum to empower learners with a range of needs.			

School systems and policies	Clear policies on attendance, behaviour, bullying, equality, and transition which sets out the responsibilities for all and the support in place			
	PSHE (or other) curriculum includes the teaching of resilience, coping and social skills for all students.			
	There is active promotion of supportive literature regarding emotional well-being and mental health for young people and parents.			
	There are clear roles and responsibilities for SENCo and emotional wellbeing leads.			
	A member of senior staff is responsible for over-seeing			

	<p>arrangements for EBSA students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This staff member liaises regularly with the SENCO to ensure appropriate assessment is undertaken and informs planning. • Staff are aware as to whom they should convey any concerns regarding EBSA. 			
	Clear systems are in place for the early identification of school avoidance (see toolkit for advice).			
School practices	Interventions are based on assessment of needs (see toolkit for advice).			
	Appropriate provision is made within a graduated response and is frequently reviewed and escalated as needed.			
	Staff access advice (toolkit, drop-ins, and consultations) with regard to assessing and supporting students experiencing EBSA.			

	<p>There is sufficient flexibility within targeted provision made to ensure that persistent non-attenders have continuity of education and provision to meet needs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online learning platforms ready • Home learning activities are produced as standard to compliment standard schemes of work • Risk assessments in place for home visits • All staff have sufficient training to use virtual communication tools for continued access to SEMH provision • Space in school is identified for flexible learning and withdrawal 			
	<p>All staff are aware of specific strategies and programmes in place to</p>			

	support those experiencing EBSA.			
--	----------------------------------	--	--	--

Appendix 3: Drawing the Tree of Life

The Tree of Life was originally created for professionals working with children affected by HIV/AIDS in southern Africa. The process allows children to share their lives through drawing their own tree of life which enables them to speak about their lives in ways that makes them stronger without re-traumatizing them. The Tree of Life can also be used individually or with groups of children to enhance sense of belongingness. It can be a useful tool for helping children understand their peers better and creating a sense of community within the school.

Prior to completing the Tree of Life, explain to the child/ren the purpose of the activity:

- To share their story from their perspective
- To think about where they come from
- To think about what they are good at
- To think about their hopes, dreams, and wishes
- To think about the significant people in their lives

Strategies for engaging the children:

- Be mindful of the child's developmental stage
- Allow the child to take the lead. They can write, draw, or use pictures to represent them at each stage.
- Encourage caregiver's involvement only if the child feels comfortable with their participation and wants to share their tree with home
- Keep a sense of humour
- Respect individuality
- Hold in mind the unique cultural aspects of the child
- Provide examples if the child appears confused or is struggling to think about what they might add to their tree

Materials Needed:

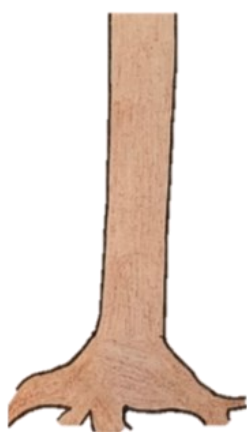
- An assortment of markers
- Large paper

Instructions:

1. Explain to the children that they will be drawing a tree with instructions to draw different parts such as roots, ground, trunk branches and leaves. They can use any of the markers as they draw their Tree of Life and can draw any kind of tree they want.



2. Ask the children to draw the **roots** of the tree and ask the children to think about their identity and what is important to them: Where do you come from? This can include places you come from, the people, the ideas, traditions. This can include things such as books, religion, language, ancestry. Who is in your family? What are their favourite activities/colours/toys/teams?



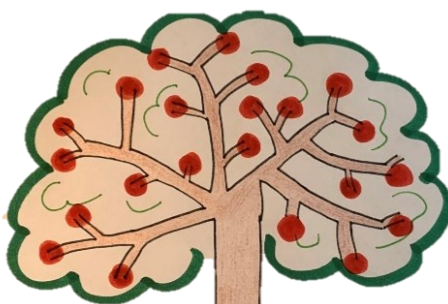
3. Ask the children to draw the **trunk** of the tree and ask the children to identify in the trunk: What skills and abilities do you have? What qualities and characteristics do you have?

Drawing out their skills through their areas of interest can be a good prompt, such as pulling out the skills needed to be good at football and helping them to think more concretely about their strengths. Providing them with a word bank of positive strengths and descriptors can also be useful at this stage.



4. Ask the children to draw the **branches** of the tree and ask the children to identify in the branches: Who is important to you and can help you when something might be a little tricky?

These people could be alive or deceased (children sometimes name deceased grandparents as someone who has helped them or that they pray to). It can also include children and/or adults or people who the child hasn't met but has been influential and contributed to their life (such as an author, artist, musician, or historical figure)



5. Ask the children to draw the **leaves** of the tree and ask the children to identify in the leaves: What are your hopes, dreams and wishes?

At this point you could help them to connect their wishes and hopes to the people in the branches and their strengths in the trunk.



6. The 'Forest Ceremony': After the tree is complete, the children may want to share their tree starting from the roots. The information shared by the children should help determine who and what is important to them. The trees are then displayed together as a **community forest** within the school to promote a sense of belonging and security within school.

Appendix 4: EBSA formulation tool

Personal Details

Child's name:

Parent/carer name(s):

Household members:

EBSA History

Describe the child's school experience including separation in the early years, when home or school first had concerns and what the child can tell you about their school experience:

Triggering Events

Triggering events are not necessarily the underlying cause of the EBSA but may be maintaining the EBSA if they have not been addressed. Describe any particular events or experiences which have caused anxiety to the child or which they often talk/worry about:

Individual Factors Underpinning EBSA

The Early Identification and Intervention toolkit should be used to explore the factors which underpin the individual child's EBSA. Use a combination of the tools described or others that are familiar to you and document them below before using them to complete the EBSA formulation.

Tool used	Date/by whom	Key findings?
EBSA risk factors		
Push and pull factors		
School well-being cards		
RAG rating the school day/mosaic		
Drawing the ideal school		

Maintaining Factors

Maintaining factors are things that also need addressing as they might stop the situation from moving on. They might be unhelpful thinking styles (negative self-perception, having overly high expectations and feeling unskilled) contextual factors (falling behind in work, lack of connection with teachers or peers) or safety behaviours (wearing headphones to ensure no interaction in public).

FORMULATION OF NEEDS

Needs identified		How needs can be met			
Area of need	Description	Resilience factors to buffer risks	Adjustments that could be made	Support available within school	Targeted intervention
Communication – how should staff communicate best with the child, does that child have any difficulties with communication?					
Interaction/inclusion/friendships – is the child able to spend time with friends or trusted adults within schools? Does the child have friendships in school and outside school?					

Emotional wellbeing– are there expectations within school that cause anxiety or distress? Does the child need help with their emotional literacy or regulation?					
Community involvement – what support is there in the wider family or community? Is the child engaging with activity or relationships outside school?					
Learning needs – is the child appropriately challenged in their learning? Do they experience any barriers including their self-esteem and motivation?					

Physical health – has the child been taught the importance of self-care, are there concerns about sleep routines or eating habits?					
Sensory – which parts of the school does the child dislike and which senses might this link to?					
Other needs identified					

Additional Support

Are there any areas of support that are at the threshold for additional support?

- Family support
- CAMHs
- SEND

Describe support needed/actions:

Monitoring

[illegible]

Appendix 5: Worries and how to talk to your child about them

What are worries?

Worries are the thoughts that we have that cause us to feel anxious. Worries are normal and can help us to plan. Worries can also stop us from doing what we want to do.

Worry diaries

Use the space below as a diary for your child to record their worries. You may need to help them draw or record them.

My worry diary

What am I doing/where am I?	Worry	How worried am I? 0-10	Is this worry about something I can control?

Worry time

Help your child by planning a time of day when they can focus on their worries. Try and get them to catch when they are worrying and write down their worry to talk about it during worry time.

When worry time comes around spend time helping your child to concentrate on the worry fully. Talk to them about worries that they can control or do something about and come up with a plan together.

Help your child to understand that some worries can't be changed by thinking about them. Try and help them to 'let these go'. You might want to actively scribble these ones out or screw them up and throw them away.

Teach your child to try and distract themselves if their worries are ones that can't be controlled or that pop up when it isn't worry time. Distraction can be:

- Thinking about a memory or activity that makes them happy. Ask them to try and recall deep details including sights, smells and sounds. This can be a useful activity at bedtime.
- Playing games that connect the thinking brain instead of the emotional brain. You could play a memory game, eye spy or 'who am I' type games.
- If your child is very distressed, then connecting them with sensory experiences in the moment can help to ground them. This might include asking them to describe things that they can see and hear in the room (for example, tell me what colour my top is, what can you hear other than my voice).

The aim is to help your child to understand when worrying is helpful and how to ignore worries that are intrusive and beyond their control. It may help them to know that you worry about things too and what you do to manage this.

Appendix 6: Instructions for the Mosaic Approach

Check before you start:

- Has the young person used 'like' / 'don't like' symbols before?
- Do they understand the difference?

What you will need:

- Digital camera
- Symbols to represent 'Like' and 'don't like' (for example, coloured dots or pens such as red and green; thumbs up and down symbols; you could use a three-point scale – red, yellow, green - if the child is able)
- Blu-tack
- 'It's okay' card
- Emotion symbols (optional – for example, smiley, sad, neutral, angry, calm faces)

Instructions:

- Start in a location in the school the young person likes
- Show them the 'like' and 'dislike' symbols asking 'do you like the room / place / object?'
- When they have chosen, encourage them to place the symbol on the door / area / object using hand-over-hand or modelling of the movement if needed
- Reinforce their choice saying 'X likes/doesn't like the (room / place / object)
- If the child does not like a place, use a 'It's okay' card to validate how they feel
- Tour the school and repeat the steps above

Next steps:

- Tour the school with the young person and take photographs of different places / objects

- Support the young person to make a photobook and think about captions for each photograph for example, 'Sam likes the playground, I can run' / 'Tara is scared in science, I feel crowded
- Use emotion symbols for the young person to choose why they might like / not like a place