

Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA)

A guide for parents and carers

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Acknowledgements

This booklet was written by parents, PACA MK (parent carer forum) MKSENDIAS, Milton Keynes Educational Psychology Service and Senior Attendance Officer (legal interventions).



My child has difficulties attending school Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA)

A guide for parents and carers

Contents

Introduction	3
What is Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA).....	3
My child is struggling to get to school, this is what it could look like	4
What could you do?	4
Meeting with the School	5
What can you expect the school to do?.....	5
What has worked well.....	7
Autism and EBSA.....	7
What should you do?	8
What school can do to support?	8
The impact on parents and carers.....	8
The Importance of Self-Care	8
How can I support my child? Top Tips.....	9
The three Rs	10
Relationships	10
So what is a supportive conversation?	10
.....	11
What can build and maintain resilience?	11
Routines.....	12
What does the law say?	12
FAQ's – common issues and concerns	13
Where can you go for help?	15
Further sources of support.....	15
Parent Support Groups:	15
Video resources:	15
National Resources.....	15

Introduction

Is your child worried about going to school?

How will the school support my child and where do I go for help?

This guide aims to answer these questions and more.

It has been produced by parents and professionals, to support you and your child if they are finding it difficult to attend school.

What is Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA)

Worrying or anxiety is a normal feeling that we all experience from time to time. It can even keep us safe from harm or help us perform in difficult situations. However, sometimes anxiety or excessive worrying can become a problem especially when it stops people doing what they want or need to do. Many children and young people worry about school. This is normal. Anxieties are part of life and learning to deal with them is part of growing up. However sometimes a child's worries may lead to difficulties attending school. If your child has high levels of anxiety and does not want to attend school, they may be experiencing Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA). (Credit West Sussex EPS)

EBSA is a broad umbrella term used to describe a group of children and young people who have severe difficulty in attending school due to unmet emotional needs, often resulting in an inability to attend school on a regular basis.

Professionals and schools may use the term EBSA.

EBSA can present differently across individuals, but can often involve fear and anxiety, distress, complaints of feeling ill without an obvious cause, reluctance to leave home, and/or oppositional behaviour.



My child is struggling to get to school, this is what it could look like

Here are a few examples of the signs and behaviour that you might notice:

- Fearfulness, anxiety, mood swings, emotional overload, meltdown or expression of negative feelings, when faced with the prospect of attending school.
- They may complain that they have abdominal pain, headache, sore throat, often with no signs of actual physical illness.
- Complain of anxiety symptoms that include a racing heart, shaking, sweating, difficulty breathing, butterflies in the tummy or nausea, pins and needles.
- Children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) may change their behaviour, which may be difficult to understand. All behaviour is a form of communication and it's important for you and the child's school to work out what your child is trying to tell you.

Examples from children/young people:

'I worry about everyone looking at me, getting a question wrong or looking stupid. I worry that I might get detention, even though haven't had one before'

'The thought of going to school in the morning makes me feel sick. I'm worried I won't get the support I need when I have a panic attack'

'They think you are just not going to school because you are lazy'

'My mum believed me the whole time. I just feel like some teachers haven't'

The timing of the symptoms can vary and may be worse at different times of the week/weekend.

The longer the problems remain unsupported the bigger the impact will be on a child or young person.

It is very important to try to help children and young people overcome these difficulties as soon as possible. Absences mean that children miss out on learning and friendships, making it even more difficult when they come back.

For more information, see the section at the end of this document - Further Sources of Support

What could you do?

One of the most important ways you can support your child is to calmly listen to them and acknowledge that their fears are real to them. Reassure them that you and the school will support them.

Contact the school as soon as possible preferably by email, stating your concerns and the difficulties your child is experiencing. For example:

- My child is unable to get out of bed/leave the room
- My child is anxious – is there a specific reason for this? e.g. bullying

- Explain if they are experiencing any physical symptoms e.g. headaches, stomach-ache, nausea or complaining of being ill.

Meeting with the School

If you have a meeting arranged with the school it is helpful to:

- Make sure you have been given a clear agenda
- Consider what your views are on the current situation and any aspects that may have had an impact on your child e.g. changes to home life, new baby etc.

See pages 20 to 23 of the [Guidance for Schools and Settings in Milton Keynes Part Two: Practical Support](#)

What can you expect the school to do?

- Listen carefully to you and your child. They should acknowledge the challenges faced by your child and you as their parent.
- Maintain close contact with you and your child, even during extended periods of non-attendance. An agreed member of staff should be named as a link person.
- ASSESS in partnership with you and your child to find out what difficulties your child is experiencing at home and in school that contribute towards school anxiety
- PLAN in conjunction with you and your child a return to school plan. Based on information gathered, plan for a realistic small integration. A plan may include very clear details such as:
 - Agreed times for attendance, who to meet, where
 - An activity or responsibility to get them through the gates
 - Agreed friends to spend time with/a buddy or mentor system
 - Agreed place of safety
 - Ensuring all staff are informed about the child or young person's difficulties, particularly during changes of classes/key stages.
 - Considering what outside agencies can help and whether it would be helpful to identify whole family support
- Do what it takes to implement the plan. Ensure resources and support are in place, good communication with school, family and others
- REVIEW and monitor the progress made and adjust the plan for the next steps
- Respond to any school-based needs, such as academic support, dealing with bullying or support with social relationships.
- If difficulties persist the school should consider requesting involvement from other professionals.
- If a secondary school aged child or young person has an identified SEN, there should be consideration of SENCo/Inclusion Manager involvement in addition to support from the pastoral care team.

The Four Stage Model (Assess-Plan-Do-Review) is recommended good practice and is described in [Emotionally Based School Avoidance \(EBSA\)](#) – Guidance for Schools and Settings in Milton Keynes – Part One: Information

Towards the beginning of initiating the plan your child may show more unhappiness and you should prepare yourself for this.

Any plan should be a mutual agreement between the parent, school, and child/young person. It should be reviewed regularly, and rewards built in to motivate the child/young person, such as choosing an activity or an hour playtime.

It is really important that all adults both at home and at school, work together to agree a firm and consistent approach. In the first instance, concerns about the plan should be shared with your link worker at the school before involving the child.

It is likely that there may be difficulties implementing the plan and these should be anticipated and solutions found. Try to keep an optimistic approach, if your child is unable to attend school, try again the next day. ‘Laddering’ is key here – expect and accept small steps towards success. Every time your child has taken a small step on the ladder towards full-time school attendance, they have proven to themselves they can do it and will do it again. Pushing your child to take too many steps before they are ready are likely to backfire.





You may feel tempted to change schools, however research tells us that often difficulties will re-emerge in the new school and whenever possible it is normally better to try to resolve the issue in the current school.






Finally, as a parent it can be really difficult to see your child unhappy. Make sure that you have someone to talk to too. This could be a friend, a family member or an organisation such as those listed at the end of this leaflet.

Here is an example of a return to school plan from [Emotionally Based School Avoidance \(EBSA\)](#) – Guidance for Schools and Settings in Milton Keynes Part Two: Practical Support – page 46

❖ Action Planning: example action / support plans

Example 1 – Child / Young Person-Centred:
Milton Keynes Council
Educational Psychology Service

Name:	Date:
At school these things can make me feel upset:	
	
My key adult(s) in school is/are:	
When I can speak to my key adult	
Where I can speak to my key adult:	
Until _____ my return to school plan includes the following changes to my attendance: (Identify any changes to the days or times they come in)	
	
Changes to my timetable include: (Identify any changes needed and what should happen/where they should be instead)	
	

Any other changes include: (Identify any other changes to routines, classroom expectations or homework)	
When I start to get upset, I notice these things about myself:	 
When I start to get upset, others notice these things about me:	
Things I can do to make myself feel better when I'm at school:	
Things that other people (staff and friends) can do to help me feel better when I'm at school:	
Things that my family can do to support me to attend school:	

If you feel you are not getting the right support, please contact:

- SEND Support Line 01908 657825, SENDSupport@milton-keynes.gov.uk

Or:

- MK SEND Information, Advice and Support Service (MK SENDIAS) 01908 254518, contact@mksendias.org.uk

What has worked well

Examples will vary from school to school and from child to child such as:

- Enrichment days written into the plan.
- Provision for therapy for school related trauma written into an EHCP.
- Offer the child a “wild card” – one day off each term.
- A key person from school making regular contact and home-visits

More examples of good practice can be found on page 51 to 67 [Guidance for Schools and Settings in Milton Keynes Part Two: Practical Support](#)

Autism and EBSA

(Credit West Sussex EPS)

Children and young people with autism often face additional challenges in school, which may make them anxious about school and appear to experience EBSA. However, it is important to appreciate that anxiety is not simply a part of autism and can be supported in its own right.

Research has helped identify key factors impacting on the anxiety of autistic children and young people. Frequent sensory processing differences can make the world unpredictable. School life is full of sensory experiences ranging from busy corridors to colourful display boards to school uniforms in materials that children might find difficult to tolerate. Difficulties in understanding their emotions also makes the world feel more uncertain and unpredictable as well as making it difficult to regulate emotions. This uncertainty and unpredictability can be difficult to tolerate and it is this intolerance of uncertainty which causes anxiety.

So, when autistic children and young people show signs of EBSA it is useful to unpick what they are finding difficult to tolerate.

Any child / young person experiencing barriers to attending school is likely to become anxious when asked to talk about their difficulties or returning to school. For an autistic young person, they may have additional layers of anxiety as they face sensory and social challenges and/or may have difficulty in being able to identify how they are feeling. Parents and carers know children best and may already have helped them to find ways of managing situations and events outside school. This experience will be helpful for your child's school when working with you to put the right support in place.

What should you do?

Make contact with the school Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) or Inclusion Manager to share your child's difficulties and work together to support their return to education.

Try to plan ahead with your child and their school for any uncertainties they might find difficult to tolerate.

What school can do to support?

- Have a whole school awareness and understanding of curriculum, teaching, and learning strategies that can support children with ASC/ sensory sensitivities. (e.g. [Quality First Teaching](#)).
- Following the implementation and review of a SEN support plan, if difficulties and concerns continue, staff understand the process for gaining further advice and involve relevant agencies and professionals at the earliest opportunity.
- If a secondary school aged child or young person has an identified SEN, there should be consideration of SENCo/Inclusion Manager involvement in addition to support from the pastoral care team.

The impact on parents and carers

(Credit Somerset EPS)

Parenting can be a challenge and parenting an anxious child even harder!

When your child is feeling anxious it is normal to feel very anxious with them. You may also feel many other things relating to your child's avoidance of school. For example, guilt, shame, confusion, worry. Anger, hopelessness etc.

As parents we often put aside our own needs and focus solely on our child and others. Doing so we run the risk of becoming "burnt out" and having no energy left for anyone or anything. Sometimes we may push down our own emotions to care for our child so much that they eventually burst out in unexpected and uncontrolled ways.

The Importance of Self-Care

When your child is getting more anxious, it is important to keep ourselves as calm as possible so we can respond to their anxiety in a logical and helpful way, rather than with emotion which can sometimes make the situation worse. Even trying to push away our feelings can make the situation worse as we can become irritable, impatient and snappy.

Here are some things you can try in the moment:

Stop and breathe (just focus your breath for a few moments)

Give yourself a 'verbal hug' (positive and encouraging self-talk)

Remind yourself of the plan

Compare with harder times you've got through/others in worse situations

Use all your senses to tune into what is all around you ('grounding'). When you notice your emotions rising, use these strategies again

Immediately After – Congratulate yourself on what you did well! Ask yourself: How am I feeling and what do I need? (e.g. distraction, self-soothe, talk etc).

Ongoing and longer-term:

Our self-care is an ongoing journey and needs our attention every day. Once the anxious moment has passed we can then focus on looking after our own wellbeing so we can continue to be the competent parent our child needs, as well as living a meaningful life.

Diet: balanced and nutritious

Sleep: as consistent and quality as possible

Rest and relaxation: 'no pressure' moments to unwind and switch off from responsibilities, no matter how briefly

Exercise: regular and whatever intensity works for you

Social support: keep connected with friends and family

Express emotions: in whatever way works for you (writing, talking, cooking, art...)

Have goals, dreams and a plan: look forward and imagine a "better" future

Hobbies: activities you enjoy and make you feel good about yourself

Learn new coping skills: self-help guides, classes, individual support

How can I support my child? Top Tips

Any child currently experiencing school attendance barriers is likely to become anxious when they are asked to talk about their difficulties or returning to school. A good place to start is to acknowledge that it may be difficult but that you would like to know what they think and feel. If

they find it difficult to talk, you could ask them a specific question this might help them start to sort through their fears and feelings. For example:

- Tell me three things that make you sad?
- Or, what three things have you been worrying about?

It is also important to focus on positives:

- Tell me something that made you smile today

Sometimes children may find it hard to tell you face to face, perhaps you could ask them to write it down, email or text you. Some children also find it easier to draw how they are feeling.

The three Rs

Relationships

Resilience

Routine

Relationships

Building and strengthening key relationships at home and in school can help a child to feel both supported and more enabled to tackle everyday demands.

For example, if we think about how children get on with their friends and other children in school. When this is going well and relationships are positive this can be something that can help to pull children back into school. When peer relationships aren't going well and particularly when children are experiencing bullying this can be something that can push them out of school.

Having a supportive conversation with your child can provide them with emotional support and can help to strengthen your relationship with them. However, starting a conversation can be difficult, especially if you are worried that your child is having a hard time.

Often you want to get straight in there and share with them your thoughts about them and how to sort it out.

So what is a supportive conversation?

Starting a conversation (Right time, right place) – Listen to understand (Focus on listening, check your understanding) – Be curious (Ask open questions, don't give advice) – Validate emotions (Accept without judging, validate their feelings) – Finish safely (Thank them, let them know you are here, ask them what would be helpful).

Questions I wish my parents had asked me

YOUNGMINDS

**#Take
20**

Who are the people you feel safe with?

Is there anything you want to talk about?

When was the last time you were very happy?

What makes you feel calm?

If you could change anything in your life what would it be?

What difficulties are you facing now?

What can I do to help?

I can tell that you really like *insert video game/app/tv show/fossil collection*, what about it do you love so much?

Where is a place you feel safe?

Do you have any worries about starting a new school?

What are you most looking forward to this week?

It's okay to keep stuff private, but did you want to tell me more about *insert subject*?

How are you coping since your dad died?

What are you worried about when you lie in bed and can't sleep?

What are you most dreading this week?

How do you feel about things changing?

Is there a lot of picking on people at your school?

Is there anyone who is upsetting you?

How do you feel about growing up? What's exciting, what's scary?

What can build and maintain resilience?

Feelings of safety and security

Sense of belonging

Ambition, aspiration, motivation and achievement

Increasing confidence and self-esteem

Encouraging independence

Positive relationships

Feel listened to and understood

Partnership between school, family and other professionals

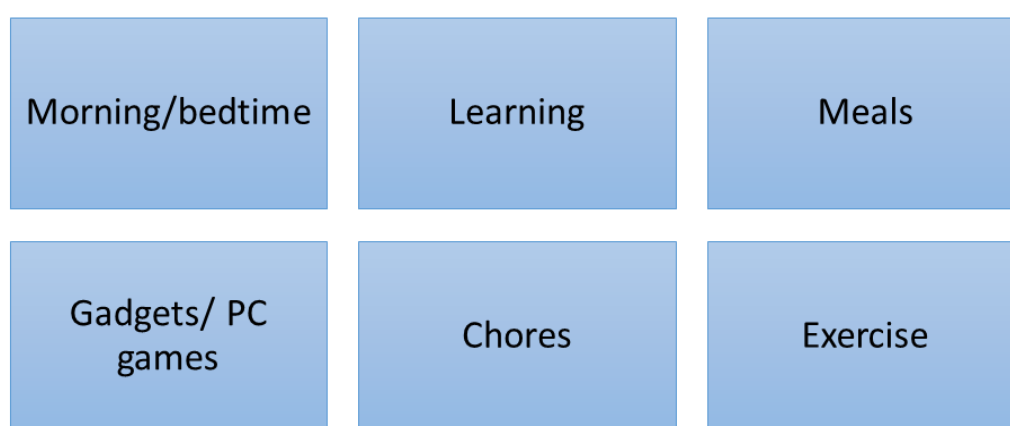
Parental understanding and support

Routines

Routines are regular habits throughout the day. Routines have far reaching psychological benefits such as alleviating stress and worry. They free up the headspace to attend to matters that cause anxiety or require some deeper thinking, reflection and planning or dealing with the inevitable unexpected.

A routine is something you know you can do well which can be comforting during tough times. Modern life, increasingly defined by unpredictability, can be anxiety-provoking, and routines provide an anchor of predictability.

Usually, an anxious child (and parent!) cannot deal with any kind of spontaneous or unorganised lifestyle. Some ideas for routines:



Energy accounting for children with sensory needs

Think of your child's energy levels as a battery – some tasks will drain the battery while some will recharge the battery. This is especially true for children who get anxious in school environments with high sensory demands (noises, crowds etc.). Energy accounting is a way of balancing your child's energy so the battery doesn't deplete completely, which may eventually lead to school avoidance. Consider identifying an individual sensory profile for your child. Then provide resources or suggest activities that meets their needs in a sensory demanding environment like school e.g. ear defenders, movement breaks, fiddle toys, traffic light colours to express how they are feeling - green (good) Amber (not so good/unsure) RED (not ok).

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

What does the law say?

It can feel very alarming if you are threatened with an attendance letter or receive one.

There are steps that schools should take before sending out letters. The information in the link below provides guidance on what schools should do and when it is appropriate for them to send out letters.

School Attendance – [A summary of the legal position](#)

FAQ's – common issues and concerns

Q: What does the law say about absence from school?

A: In regard to school attendance legislation, we defer to the Education Act, 1996, Section 7 of which states that every child of statutory school age (term after fifth birthday to last Friday in June in Y11) should receive a full-time education suitable to his “age, needs and abilities”. That can either be at home or at school. If a child is on a school roll and they fail to attend, the parent is committing an offence under S. 444 (1) or S.444 (1A).

Q: Who can authorise an absence?

A: The school (Headteacher) authorises absence, not the parent.

Even though the parent may present a reason for absence, the school may decline to accept it. The reasons for this may be because:

It is a trivial reason for non-attendance (e.g. buying school trousers or a haircut)

Or, there is persistent absence which the parent states is due to illness but it is not supported by medical evidence. In these circumstances the school may request medical evidence from a medical professional (the school cannot do this without the parent's consent so will usually ask the parent to provide the evidence).

The DfE state that all schools should evidence pupils who have persistent absence (PA), this is absence below 90%. It may be that the absence is due to ongoing medical reasons in which case there will be professional evidence, or it could be due to other issues, whatever the reason the school must ensure it evidences its staged interventions and provides evidence where possible.

Q: When will formal action be taken? E.g. formal letters

A: We would expect the school to have undertaken certain procedures prior to referral for legal interventions, these would include meeting with parents to try to investigate the absence; parenting contracts; review of the curriculum and investigation into possible SEN.

There always needs to be a warning letter prior to referral, indeed these are the questions we request that schools answer when making a referral to our service:

- Has the school met with the parent/carer either at home or in school to devise a plan for change?
- If Yes, how many times?
- Did the parent/carer agree to a Parenting Contract?
- What was the parent/carers response?
- Did the attendance improve after the above interventions?
- Why has it now deteriorated?
- Has the parent/carer informed, by letter, that absence would only be authorised on receipt of GP or other medical notes?
- Has attendance been an issue in previous years?
- If so, what action has been taken?

- Is the pupil concerned about bullying?
- What has the school done to alleviate such concerns?
- Is the child/YP exhibiting anxiety?
- What steps has the school taken?
- Has a referral been made to MASH (Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub)? What was the outcome?
- Are Children's Social Care or Children and Family Practices involved? Have they been involved in the past?
- Has a referral been made to CAMHS? Is the pupil under CAMHS?
- Does the pupil have an EHCP?
- Is the pupil a looked after child (LAC)?
- Does the pupil have SEN Support?
- Has a FACT/FACT + been completed?

Ultimately, we are looking for signs that the parent/carer(s) are working with agencies to try to resolve attendance issues and where no improvement is taking place some professional evidence is provided or colleagues, in other agencies for example Children's Services, Early Help or Inclusion, feel the family is engaging and progress is being made.

Q: What can schools do to help?

A: The EBSA guidance gives clear advice regarding what schools can do but here is a list of the most common things schools might attempt:

- Reduced timetables which are regularly reviewed.
- Removal from certain lessons
- Changes to form/teaching groups.
- Rewards/praise for small improvements.
- Time out cards.
- Work in small groups within special areas of the school.
- Adjustment to the school day.
- Learning mentor or TA support.
- Managed Move to another school.
- Referral to Alternative Provision.

Some of the above might be encompassed in a Parenting Contract which has the advantage that it is an agreement between all parties and should be regularly reviewed every 4/6 weeks.

Q: When could legal action be taken?

A: Ultimately when pursuing a prosecution all prosecutors must consider two factors:

- 1) Is the prosecution in the public interest?
- 2) Is the prosecution likely to be successful in terms of securing a conviction?

Q: What will happen next if my child has not attended education for a long time due to their very severe anxiety?

A: Sometimes these young people may need the support of health professionals to manage their anxiety before they are able to make a successful return to education.

Where can you go for help?

Further sources of support

If you need more support in helping your child get to school, these services/people can help.

- SEND Support Line 01908 657825, SENDSupport@milton-keynes.gov.uk
- MK SEND Information, Advice and Support Service (MK SENDIAS) 01908 254518, contact@mksendias.org.uk
- [EBSA guidance for schools on the Local Offer](#)
- [Parent programmes and workshops on the Local Offer](#)

Parent Support Groups:

- Parent Talk, Action for Children www.parents.actionforchildren.org.uk/
- Local parent groups- [MK Local Offer](#)

Video resources:

- Support Services for Education, Somerset County Council <https://www.supportservicesforeducation.co.uk/Page/19956>
- Suffolk LA <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Koxn1ILdAyQ>
- Podcast link – Suffolk LA <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Koxn1ILdAyQ>

National Resources

- [National Autistic Society \(NAS\) Autism Helpline: 0808 800 4104](#)
 - Young Minds - A charity championing the wellbeing and mental health of young people. They publish a range of information for parents and have a parent helpline. Calls are free Mon-Fri from 9:30am to 4pm 0808 802 5544 Website: <https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/>
 - Social anxiety and refusal <https://www.youngminds.org.uk/parent/parents-a-z-mental-health-guide/school-anxiety-and-refusal/>
 - Anxiety UK www.anxietyuk.org.uk
 - IPSEA: <https://www.ipsea.org.uk/school-anxiety>
 - School attendance: Guidance for schools <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-attendance>
 - ACE Education: <http://www.ace-ed.org.uk/advice-about-education-for-parents/attendance>
 - Samaritans - Call FREE on: 116123 <https://www.samaritans.org/>
-