

Breaking A Cycle Of School Avoidance

Since lockdown schools are reporting that the number of pupils who are unable to attend has grown considerably and they have asked for advice to support pupils and families who find themselves in this situation.

We are not talking about school truancy here which is generally done without parent/carer knowledge, and you will notice that I have not used the term “school refusal” because doing so would imply that this is a behavioural issue which it is not, and it is certainly not a parenting issue, although of course parents play their part. EBSA – Emotionally Based School Avoidance is:

- when children and young people (CYP) fail to attend school because it is too emotionally challenging (often anxiety is the key emotion at play)
- when they attend but only when there is a high level of support in place
- when they avoid certain days or classes.

Sometimes it can be unclear that EBSA is the problem. For example, if a pupil arrives in a highly anxious state but then seems to settle swiftly, staff might question that they have EBSA. Anxiety disappears when the threat disappears, and this can happen quickly but it is still EBSA.

Whatever the cause we need to remind ourselves that they are not BEING a problem, they are HAVING a problem with the school environment, and treating it as a behavioural issue is unhelpful.

This is perhaps made clearer when you consider the most common reasons children and young people give for not being in school:

- Generalised anxiety, separation anxiety, and social anxiety
- Academic pressure and fear of getting things wrong/failing
- Transition between schools/year groups
- Competitive culture
- Lack of a sense of connection with staff or peers
- Not having a sense of purpose/what is the point?
- Finding school exhausting
- Low self-esteem
- Bullying by either staff or peers/witnessing bullying
- Punishment for lateness (non-attendance becomes preferable)
- Special Educational Needs (particularly when unidentified)
- Incompatible school environment

The school culture or environment must meet the needs of pupils on many different levels.

- Pupils must feel physically and emotionally safe at school
- They need to know there is order and discipline and that the adults are in charge.
- They need to know that they will be treated fairly, and that staff are on hand should things go wrong.
- Transparency in your dealings with them and their parents is vital for building trust.
- Teaching is about relationships and pupils need to feel safe, valued and respected by teachers – for more on this follow our [CPD Course for Staff](#) in The Wellbeing Hub.
- The physical environment of the school matters – they are busy, noisy places which can be overwhelming for any pupil, but especially for those with Special Educational Needs. Classrooms which are untidy or disorganised can feel chaotic for anxious children.
- The academic aspirations of the school need to feel achievable for pupils. They need to feel recognised and supported in classes.

What can we do to help young people?

Early intervention is key:

- Gather information from the staff who know the pupil best.
- Flag changes in either punctuality or attendance.
- Flag changes in health – unexplained head or tummy pains can be related to anxiety.
- Flag changes in behaviour such as a drop in engagement or negativity about school.
- What are their strengths?
- Do they seem to have good relationships with peers/adults?
- What difficulties do they seem to have?
- Can the staff who looked after them last year shed any light on the situation?
- Consider assessment for a mental illness / SEN
- Track changes to build a picture of triggers/responses/helpful and unhelpful strategies.

Are you working with the whole family?

Anxious parents beget anxious children. Children who are not in school increase parental anxiety and it can quickly become a vicious cycle. Encourage parents to work with you as a team to support their child. During your first meeting you are trying to build a picture of the background, the current situation, and how parents are feeling/coping. You will need to be very sensitive and remember that some parents have their own school trauma which will inform how they are able to respond to both their child and the school.

- Here are some examples of questions you might want to ask in the initial meeting:
 - Do you have any thoughts on why your child might be finding school hard?
 - Does your child generally find being apart from you difficult?



- What is your child's experience of school so far?
 - What does your child enjoy doing?
 - What are they good at?
 - What do they want to do later in life?
 - Has anything changed at home recently?
 - Who do you think your child would be most likely to talk to at home?
 - Does your child talk about their peers?
 - Do you get the sense that your child has a supportive relationship with any adults in school?
 - How do you think your child is coping academically? Do they struggle with homework? Are there particular subjects/teachers they find hard?
 - Has your child voiced any worries about school?
 - Can you describe the daily routine your child has out of school?
 - How is this problem impacting other members of the family?
 - What do you think might be helpful for you and your child?
- Share the highs (even if they are small) with parents/carers to build school positivity. Too often they only get the call up when things are going wrong which fuels everyone's anxiety.
 - Try to create non-threatening events that parents/carers can attend to build their trust in the school culture, trust which they will then model for their children. Coffee, cake, and a chat (you could use the parenting courses in The Wellbeing Hub as a framework for these sessions) can be a nice way to support families. Bringing pupils and parents into school out of hours to walk the site can help them visualise where they are going to be during different lessons etc which can reduce anxiety.
 - Encourage parents to create a daily routine. Getting organised the night before gives the message that we expect to be in school. Getting up, dressed, breakfasted, out of the door, arriving at school and knowing exactly what to do once on site and then doing it all in the same order, at the same time creates habits which, over time, reduce anxiety.

What information can you obtain from the pupil?

- Can they tell you what they are finding challenging?
- Do they understand anxiety ([The Clear Fear App](#) is great for this)?
- What is important to them at home, and at school?
- Is anything happening at home that is making it hard for them to come into school?
- What do they like/dislike about school?
- Which lessons do they enjoy/dislike/feel most competent in?
- Who do they feel safe/unsafe with?
- Where do they feel safe/unsafe?
- When do they feel safe/unsafe?
- What do they think would help them?

- West Sussex Educational Psychology Department have produced an excellent Return to School Questionnaire to share with children [HERE](#).

Giving CYP a sense of power and control in the process can help reduce their fear, but it is important for them to feel contained. To prevent a situation arising where they end up with too much power and not enough containment (both can increase anxiety) do not make decisions in these early meetings. Note their thoughts and ideas and then consider what is practical, and where you can make concessions. Parents and CYP might not have considered how certain routes might increase their sense of otherness.

Think about the school day from a pupil's perspective:

- Is there anything happening at home which might prevent them arriving on time/at all? For example, children with obsessive compulsive disorder might be taking so much time checking/repeating that they run late, and then feel overwhelmed by the idea of entering school halfway through the morning or a lesson. Eating Disorders and Over Exercising might also make a child late. Perhaps they are depressed and struggling to get out of bed, or are feeling too anxious to leave the house. Are they caring for someone who they are afraid to leave, or worried about a vulnerable parent?
- Are parents going through an acrimonious separation or divorce which is impacting their child's ability to be in school? In our pastoral leads meeting several schools said they had sometimes involved social services to mediate which had helped reduce the impact on the child.
- Is the journey from home to school overwhelming them? Public transport or a school bus can feel unsafe as there is often no adult in charge. What could be done to make the journey feel safer and easier?
- In our pastoral leads meeting several schools said they had a therapy dog who greeted pupils and walked into school with them and that this had been helpful for many children.
- If a child has separation anxiety it can be helpful to vary the parent/adult who drops them off and encourage the adults to make their farewell short. Kiss and fly can be a nice way to think of it.
- Bringing in a comforting, familiar object from home can help children feel connected to family even when they are not present. A snippet of fabric from home which they can keep in their pocket to touch or smell when they feel wobbly can be reassuring.
- When a pupil makes it into school make them feel welcome – not in a superficial way “oh, amazing, you are here” but in a genuine way “I am so glad you made it today –

we are going to be studying poetry in English and I value your ideas". Think about what you like about this child, why you want them to be in your classroom, and let them know.

- Focus on the positives which for this pupil is getting through the door. If they are late, messy or haven't done their homework, be sure you need to address the behaviour before you say something which might put them off attending tomorrow.
- Help this pupil to understand that they are not alone and that there is help. Sometimes being introduced to an older pupil who has been through a similar experience and overcome it can provide reassurance and hope. Perhaps they could become a mentor for this pupil.
- Wherever possible give children a sense of power and control – for example you could ask them what they need to help them get into school, or how they would like to be treated if they are late. Working with them to come up with a plan helps them feel more in control which allays anxiety and builds confidence
- When they arrive at school where do they go and how safe are those areas? Locker/cloakrooms can be places where bullying happens because there is no adult supervision.
- Who is welcoming them and is there a daily check in to see how they are feeling? Planning their arrival can make all the difference. Perhaps they would be better arriving a little early or late to avoid peak busy times. Do they need to be greeted at the gate and walked into school by a member of staff? Would they benefit from going somewhere quieter than the classroom first? Would it help them to be given a task assisting the teacher, so they feel immediately involved and distracted?
- If they are not feeling ok is there someone who has time to help them to settle?
- Are friendship issues contributing to this pupil's anxiety? Several of our schools have said that the approach suggested by the team at [Girls on Board](#) have helped reduce friendship issues amongst girls. They are now working with boys too.
- Can you reduce their timetable? Few of us learn when we are distressed – a reduced timetable to allow time for talking/support can help pupils work through their emotions and return to full time education.
- If a pupil is feeling overwhelmed during the school day, can they signal that they need time out? Is this subtle enough for them not to attract unwelcome attention from others, and do teachers know how to respond in a similar fashion?



- Have you identified one or more adults that this pupil feels safe with, and what opportunities do you provide for them to build the relationship? They need a safe base in school – if you want more information on this please visit [lesson 2 in the Staff CPD Course](#).
- Do you have a physical safe space in the school where pupils can take time out? See this blog created by [Gateshead Council and Education Gateshead for ideas on how to create a safe space](#). During the pastoral leads meeting some schools said a safe space had helped and others were less sure. All agreed that safe spaces needed to be supervised, age and stage appropriate, and that pupils should be involved in the planning stage. Some pupils will respond better to a walk
- Do pupils have strategies to calm themselves when they start to feel overwhelmed, and are these strategies practiced regularly? For example, you could teach them the rectangle technique:
 - Put both feet on the floor
 - Spend 20 seconds counting how many rectangles you can see around you
 - Choose one of the rectangles and start to breathe around it always breathing in on the short sides and out on the long sides.
 - Keep tracking around the rectangle for as long as you need to

Another effective technique worth sharing with pupils is the 5,4,3,2,1 way to calm:

NAME:

- 5 things you can see
 - 4 things you can feel (eg feet on the ground, collar of your shirt on your skin)
 - 3 things you can hear
 - 2 things you can smell (or think of something you like to smell)
 - 1 thing you can taste (or think of something you like to taste)
- Do you have visual cues to remind pupils what to do if they are feeling stressed? We want them to learn to help themselves before they feel overwhelmed so put-up pictures of the rectangle technique and the 5 ways to calm
 - How do your pupils move between lessons as this can be a time when children feel particularly unsafe. Corridors are noisy and lend opportunities for bullying. In Britain's Strictest School (an interesting watch on the ITV Hub) silence is compulsory in corridors and on stairs, and whilst this sounds draconian it was interesting to hear that the pupils felt much safer as a result – food for thought...
 - What happens at break times? Breaks, like corridors can be anxiety inducing for pupils who struggle with noise, who may be the victims of bullying, who have poor social skills, or worry about being left. We need to help the socially anxious gain the social skills which will help them address their anxiety, but there will always be

pupils for whom breaks in the day feel overwhelming. What provision do you have in place for them to socialise in quieter ways? Are they avoiding the canteen/lunch hall because they don't have anyone to sit with? Could they have a card that allows them to skip the canteen queue? Brainstorm with the pupil to find what might work for them.

- Do you make wellbeing a priority in your classrooms? For example, do you stop every so often during the day to do something wellbeing related such as square breathing (breathing in and out for the same amount of time eg 4 counts in and 4 counts out); running on the spot; stretching; playing some music or doing something creative? Could you fit in a four-minute video [like this one](#) to help CYP understand how to be happier through compassion and gratitude?
- The beginning of a new term, half-term or even a regular Monday morning can be particularly challenging for those struggling with EBSA. Encourage parents to do the walk throughs and talk throughs which help to prepare a young person for an upcoming stressful situation. Advice for parents – stay calm, empathise, guess how you think they might be feeling, name what they might be worrying about, explore coping strategies they might use to calm themselves, ask what they will need to help them get into school. Don't shame them for being afraid, or threaten them with being in trouble – they know school is important and they would go if they could go.
- Is there anything you can do at school to make the return to school or the beginning of the year/term/Monday easier for this pupil? This is particularly important for those with separation anxiety, but knowing what they are going to be expected to do, where they will have to go, and who they will be with can reduce stress for everyone. If the physical environment has changed, could you record a little video of the new look/layout and share it with parents and pupils? Could you send a copy of the timetable, rules, and routines out so that parents can talk through them with their child?
- Do all the staff working with this pupil understand their needs, their signal for time out, and are they treating this pupil as having a problem rather than being a problem?
- Be mindful that the siblings of a pupil who is struggling to get into school will be affected. They might be late and stressed too – work with them and let them know you understand their situation.

Most of the suggestions made here will be helpful for all pupils and should be part of a whole school approach, but when working with EBSA you will need an individualised care plan created in collaboration with the pupil and their family.

The Assess, Plan, Do, Review model (as described in the [SEND Code of Practice](#) Page 86) can provide a useful framework for helping individuals. Just be mindful that you do the Review bit regularly as this is often where we fall short.

During our pastoral leads meeting the question of sanctions came up and the general opinion was that sometimes the disciplinary route can open conversations, but it can also heighten anxiety. Approach it from a safeguarding perspective (we need to keep you safe which means knowing where you are). Explore with pupil and parents what a disciplinary response would look like.

No matter what framework and processes you have in place there will be some pupils who you will not manage to help back into school. This is not a failure on your part, EBSA is complex. The sensible course at this point is a letter to social services explaining that you have done all you can, that you have reached your remit, and that you need them to step in to ensure this child's safety. Our schools reported a swift and positive response to this approach.