

Breaking A Cycle Of School Avoidance For Parents

“Nearly two million children in England are missing from school, and classroom attendance has reached a ‘crisis point’ since the lockdowns, according to the Centre for Social Justice” (The Children’s Alliance, 2022).

Since lockdown the number of children and young people not attending school has risen dramatically. In this article we are not talking about school truancy 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 as parents we play our part.

EBSA – Emotionally Based School Avoidance (also sometimes known as ABSA Anxiety Based School Avoidance) is:

- when children and young people 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, adults might question that they have EBSA. Anxiety disappears when the feeling of threat disappears, and this can happen quickly, but it is still EBSA.

Whatever the cause we need to remind ourselves that some children and young people fail to attend school because it is too emotionally challenging. They are not BEING a problem, they are HAVING a problem with the school environment, and treating it as a behavioural issue is unhelpful.

If you are the parent of a child who is currently out of school, you will undoubtedly know how stressful this situation can be. There is the worry of them missing out on education and the social connection that school provides; there is the pressure that some schools place on parents to get children in; there is the threat of sanctions; the additional demand on parents of having a child at home full time, and the judgement that some might face from other parents. If any of these resonate with you, I am sorry, and I hope you find this article helpful.

Understanding why children might not be in school is the starting point and will require some investigation on your part. Here are the most common reasons children and young people give for not being in school, but everyone is different:

- Generalised anxiety, separation anxiety, and social anxiety
- Academic pressure and the fear of getting things wrong/failing
- Exam seasons
- Competitive culture
- Lack of a sense of connection with staff or peers
- Friendship issues
- 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.

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 needs to feel achievable for pupils – as parents, we need to ensure we chose the school that is right for our child.

What can we do to help children who are experiencing EBSA?

Firstly, we must think about our relationship with the school. If we struggled at school or experienced trauma during our education journey, we might find it difficult to trust our child’s school. If we don’t feel that school is a safe space we will communicate our unease, consciously or unconsciously, to our child who will learn to view school through a similar lens. Schools don’t always get things right, and nor do parents, but we all do our best, and when we can work together, we create the safest environment for children. If you are struggling with your child’s school environment because of your history, who could you turn to for help to overcome your mistrust/trauma? Perhaps some sessions with a therapist would help, or could you ask a calm relative or friend to help you book an appointment and accompany you whilst you meet with the school staff?

Early intervention is key, so if you see the following happening with your child book an appointment to talk to their school:

- Changes in either punctuality or attendance
- Changes in health – unexplained head or tummy pains can be related to stress
- Changes in behaviour such as a drop in engagement or negativity about school.

Think about the school day from your child’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.
- 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 – could you drive/walk them in until they are feeling calmer? Could they meet up with a friend to travel in together?
- If a child has separation anxiety it can be helpful to vary which parent/adult drops them off. Try and make the 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.

- Share the highs with school – if something positive happens at home share the news with their teacher. The more valued they feel in the school environment the better.
- Working with your school shows your child that you trust the school which will help them build trust too.

Discussion points/suggested wording/questions for a meeting with school – to make it easier to read I have used “we” and “our”...

- We have noticed xxx and we are worried, we wondered what you have noticed in school?
- We are sure this is something you have come across before and we wondered what you have done in the past that might be helpful for our child?
- We think it is important that we work collaboratively to help our child so please tell us if you think we can do anything differently, and is it ok for us to do the same to you?
- It would be helpful if we had a really clear idea of what our child’s experience of school is, so we have put questions together for you. Here goes:
- When our child makes it into school how do you make them feel welcome?
- The immediate focus for our child is getting through the door – he/she/they might not have done their homework, or we might be late, or messy – can you make sure all staff are sure they need to address behavioural issues before they say something which might put my son/daughter off attending tomorrow?
- Is there an older pupil who has been through a similar experience and overcome it who might be able to provide reassurance and hope for our child?
- Might there be children in the class who could buddy up with our child to accompany them around the campus?
- Can we bring our child in when there are no pupils on site so that we can familiarise ourselves with the campus and what happens where? Familiarity builds confidence and can massively reduce anxiety.
- When our child arrives 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 our child? 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 or the school dog? 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?
- Do you think it would be helpful to reduce their timetable, and if so, which subject would you suggest we drop for now?
- Do you think it would be helpful for our child to have a signal they can use when they need time out? (make sure the signal is subtle enough for them not to attract unwelcome attention from others, and ensure that teachers know how to respond when they see the signal).
- Have you noticed that our child struggles socially? What could we do to help them have better relationships with their peers?
- Do you have a physical safe space in the school where pupils can take time out?
- What happens at break times? What provision do you have in place for children to socialise in quieter ways? Do you think our child is avoiding the canteen/lunch hall because they don’t have anyone to sit with? Could they have a card to allow them to skip the lunch queue?
- Do you have visual cues to remind pupils what to do if they are feeling stressed?
- Is there anything you can do at school to make the beginning of the year/term/Monday easier for our child? For example, could you tell us in advance who the class teacher is going to be; who else will be in their class/dormitory; of any major changes to the school? Could you record a little video

of the new look/layout and share it with us? Could you send a copy of the timetable, rules, and routines out so we can talk through them with our child?

- This situation is having an impact on our whole family – are the teachers involved with X's siblings also aware of what is going on? What support can they expect?
- What can we do at home to support what you are doing here?

General suggestions for you as parents:

- Be inquisitive – you want to try and find out why school is so challenging for your child. They might well not tell you straight away but don't give up asking.
- If your child can't speak to you, ask if there is someone else they would like to talk to. Having your permission to talk to another adult shows that you will support them in any way you can.
- Offer professional help. Your GP is the place to start as they will be able to provide both a diagnosis and access to support services. It is normal to feel anxious about seeking external help, but if you can model trust in the professionals for your child, you will help them to see it as a safe process. In therapy, the quality of the relationship is key to a successful outcome, so you might need to try a couple before you find the right fit for your child. Thinking outside the box can also help as therapy comes in many forms e.g. artistic children might benefit from art therapy; musical children might find music therapy helpful, and animal lovers might find equine therapy more accessible.
- Your child needs you to stay calm. Show empathy by trying to 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.
- The beginning of a new term, half-term or even a regular Monday morning can be particularly challenging for those struggling with EBSA. Do the walk-throughs and talk-throughs which help to prepare a young person for an upcoming stressful situation. For example, you might talk to them about who is going to be teaching them, look at their new timetable, make sure they know where to put their things, who to go to if they are feeling anxious.
- Try 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.
- Wherever possible give your child or young person 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.
- Does your child have strategies to calm themselves when they are starting 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 is the 5,4,3,2,1 way to calm:

NAME:

- 5 things you can see
- 4 things you can feel (e.g., 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)

I hope this article is helpful but if you need further support please search for anxiety related resources in The Wellbeing Hub or feel free to get in contact.