

Emotional Based School Avoidance

Emotional Based School Avoidance (EBSA) can be used to describe children and young people who do not attend school due to emotional factors. This absence can often lead to long periods of time away from school. EBSA is different from absence for physical illness and truancy. Most young people experiencing EBSA can be highly anxious and show significant distress about attending school. In many instances, they remain engaged with education and want to return to school even though they feel unable to do so. Often, the young person's anxiety will reduce during weekends or school holidays.

Cause

EBSA is a complex issue, and it is likely that several factors, rather than one single cause, contribute to a young person finding attending school difficult. Each child and situation are unique. Some factors are complex and interlinked. For example, they might include the young person, the family, and the school environment (Thambirajah et al 2008).

We also understand that the onset of school avoidance appears to be at or at around the time of transition between key stages. Research, for example, continues to show an increase in emotionally based non-school attendance around the time that young people move from primary to secondary school (Nutall & Woods, 2013; Pellegrini, 2007; Thambirajah et al, 2008).

This information is taken from [Emotionally Based School Avoidance Guidance for professionals working with families and young people](#) which was created by Sheffield Educational Psychology Service in 2020.

Possible indicators of EBSA

There can be a variety of signs or indications that a child or young person is having difficulty attending school. Below is a list of some of the early warning signs that a child might display, but there can be many others:

- Pleading to go home,
- Difficulty separating from parents e.g. reluctance to leave parents to get out of the car/at the school gate,
- Refusing to go into certain lessons or not going to their classroom,
- Lateness,
- A change in attendance and/or punctuality,
- Frequent absence for minor illnesses,
- Patterns in absences e.g. particular days,
- Reluctant to leave home and stays away from school with or without the knowledge of parent/carer,
- Expresses a desire to attend classes but is unable to do so,

- Speaking negatively about school,
- Changes in behaviour,
- Presenting as more anxious or with low mood,
- Physical signs linked to stress (e.g. stomach ache, sickness, headache).

What to do if you're worried about your Child's Attendance

At the first sign that your child is experiencing uncomfortable emotions around attending school, contact the school and identify a key person there (often the SENCo or Head of Year). Maintain open, regular communication with them. Whilst this is happening, reassure your child that you and this person are working together to find a good way forward.

Talk to family and friends or seek out people in a similar situation to talk to.

Encourage your child to share their thoughts and concerns with you. Find time to listen to them without judgement or trying to 'fix' things.

Work with your child, and any other adults supporting them, to find techniques that support them to feel calm and regulated.

Contact the [SENDIASS Team](#) for support in having those conversations with school.

Useful links

[Not Fine in School](#) - A parent-led organisation supporting families experiencing school refusal and attendance difficulties along with raising awareness of related issues. Lots of videos and support as well as guides for schools and families.

[Young Minds](#) - Information, advice and publications on mental health with detailed sections on anxiety for young people, parents/carers and professionals. Includes a parent survival guide and monthly live parents lounge sessions with mental health professionals.

[Mind Ed](#) - Some free online courses on how to support young people with mental health difficulties.

[Define Fine](#) – A national parent/carer led peer support organisation.

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