

## Emotional barriers to school attendance (EBSA)

### Overview description

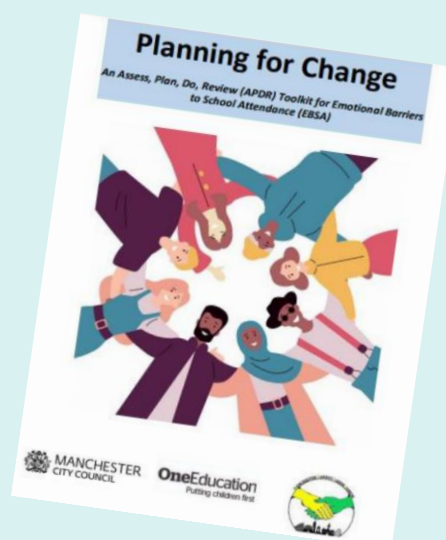
Emotional barriers to school attendance (EBSA) is a term used to describe the actions of a group of children and young people who have difficulty in attending school due to emotional factors, often resulting in prolonged absences from school. The impact is far reaching and negative outcomes can include lower academic attainment, reduced social opportunities and more limited employment opportunities (Garry 1996, Pellegrini 2007 and Taylor 2012).

Manchester's approach is one of inclusion for all children and young people with a focus on strong multi-agency working.

### Key Information

Manchester's EBSA guidance has just been updated - Emotional Barriers to School Attendance (EBSA) 2024. The new title (rather than Anxiety Based School Avoidance) reflects a broader lens which is more inclusive of students still in school. Anxiety is no longer believed to be the underlying cause, but a presenting need. It includes post-Covid-19 research and is focused on a preventative and early intervention approach. It also provides clear information about the link between neurodiversity, particularly autism, and EBSA.

The document is shorter and comes with an accompanying document which is a print and go resource: Planning for Change. This has lots of helpful practical resources to support settings with their work with CYP and their families



Effective approaches to address EBSA are based on:

- Early Identification
- Effective information gathering and analysis; from the child, parent/carer and professionals who know the pupil well
- Co-producing a plan for a return to school / improved school attendance

## Key Messages

- It should be treated as any other Special Educational Need; follow Assess - Plan – Do - Review cycles (see below)
- A thorough assessment should be carried out; of the challenges the education setting presents, the risk factors and other factors that may be keeping pupil at home; ideally, bring in your EP to support this
- There are helpful assessment and planning tools and templates in the appendices of Manchester’s EBSA guidance document (see above).
- The earlier the identification and intervention, the better. There are often warning signs for EBSA, including in the early stages of primary school
- Be aware of how stressful and upsetting this issue is for families; listen to them and work with them, avoid blame
- Maintain frequent communication with the family throughout any period of school non-attendance. They can become isolated. Avoid letting the pupil go ‘off the radar’.
- Autistic children are more at risk
- Transition is a common trigger point
- Consider the possibility of an unmet/undiagnosed special need – speak to your link EP
- Be prepared to be very flexible: you are dealing with a mental health issue
- There are unlikely to be quick fixes, but ‘wraparound’ support will yield the better outcomes; a multi-agency approach is advocated; CAMHS, Speech and Language Therapists and other external professionals may have a part to play.

### Factors associated with vulnerability of EBSA

School Factors	Family Factors	Child factors
Bullying (the most common school factor)	Separation and divorce or change in family dynamic	Temperamental style- reluctance to interact and withdrawal from unfamiliar settings, people or objects
Difficulties in specific subject	Parent physical and mental health problems	Fear of failure and poor self confidence
Transition to secondary school, key stage or change of school	Overprotective parenting style	Physical illness
Structure of the school day	Dysfunctional family interactions	Age (5-6, 11-12 & 13-14 years)
Academic demands/high levels of pressure and performance-orientated classrooms	Being the youngest child in the family	Learning Difficulties, developmental problems or Autism Spectrum Condition if unidentified or unsupported
Transport or journey to school	Loss and Bereavement	Separation Anxiety from parent
Exams	High levels of family stress	Traumatic events
Peer or staff relationship difficulties	Family history of EBSA	
	Young carer	

## Assess - Plan – Do - Review cycle

### Assess

- Gather information to identify risk factors (see Manchester guidance document pp 44 - 48)
- Use active listening to gather information from the child/young person, family and school
- Avoid making assumptions about the cause and what needs to happen next
- Keep an open professional curiosity about the reasons behind non-attendance behaviour
- Create a profile of the issues involved and act swiftly to prevent the non-attendance behaviour from becoming entrenched

### Plan

Use the information gathered to form the basis of an action plan.

- The child/young person and family should be involved in drawing up the plan and agreeing actions/timescales; listen to the young person
- Analyse all the information gathered Your link EP will be able to support at this stage
- Include planning to improve resilience, build self-esteem, high aspirations,
- Consider the positive relationships with adults and maintaining positive relationships with peers
- The child/young person who may show distress when the process starts - it is important that a consistent and firm approach is agreed: parents and school need to work together and show a 'united front'.
- Schools must take an individual and flexible approach

### Do

- All actions agreed must be in the plan; do not be tempted to deviate even if things are going well
- Make sure that all staff who have contact with the young person are familiar with the plan.
- Ensure that support agreed in the planning stage is available
- Plan to keep the child or young person in their 'stretch' zone – making well supported progress.
- Be prepared for this to take time and recognise that the child/young person may find this difficult. A very small steps approach may be key

### Review

Regularly review the plan and celebrate small steps of progress. Be mindful that progress may be patchy to start with.

- Use the review to identify what else might support progress.
- Keep listening to the young person and their family.
- Stay positive and pro-active.

## References

- Baker, M & Bishop, F. (2015). Out of school: a phenomenological exploration of non-attendance. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 31: 4, 354-368.
- Blagg, N. (1987). *School Phobia and its treatment*. London. Croom Helm. Conduct
- Elliott, J G. (1999). Practitioner Review: School Refusal: Issues of Conceptualisation, Assessment, and Treatment. *Child Psychology & Psychiatry*. Vol.40, No.7,1001-1012.
- Gulliford, A. & Miller, A. (2015) Coping with life by coping with school? School refusal in young people. In *Educational Psychology* Ed. Cline, T., Gulliford, A. & Birch, S. Routledge. Hove, UK.
- Kearney, C. & Silverman, W. (1993). Measuring the Function of School Refusal Behaviour: The School Refusal Assessment Scale' *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology*, 22:1, 85-96.
- Kearney, C.A. and Silvermann, W.K. (1990) A preliminary analysis of a functional model of assessment and treatment of school refusal behaviour. *Behaviour Modification* 14, 340-366.
- Kearney, C.A., & Spear, M. (2012) School refusal behavior. School-based cognitive-behavioral interventions. En R.B. Mennutti, A. Freeman y R.W. Christner (Eds.), *Cognitive-behavioral interventions in educational settings: A handbook for practice* (pp. 161-183). New York, NY: Taylor & Francis
- King, N. & Bernstein, G. (2001). School Refusal in Children and Adolescents: A Review of the Past 10 Years. *Journal of American Academy of Child Adolescent Psychiatry*, 2001, 40(2):197– 205.
- Maynard, B. R., Brendel, K. E., Bulanda, J. J., Heyne, D., Thompsom, A. & Pigott, T. D. (2015) Psychosocial interventions for school refusal with primary and secondary students: A systematic review. *Campbell Systematic Reviews* 2015:12. DOI: 10.4073/csr.2015.12
- Nuttall, C. & Woods, K. (2013) Effective intervention for school refusal behaviour. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 29:4, 347-366, DOI: [10.1080/02667363.2013.846848](https://doi.org/10.1080/02667363.2013.846848)
- Pellegrini, D. (2007). School non-attendance: definitions, meanings, responses, interventions. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 23(1), 63-77
- Taylor, C. (2012) Improving attendance at school. London *DFE*
- Thambirajah M,S., Grandison K.J., and De-Hayes L. (2008) Understanding School refusal: a handbook for professionals in education, Health and Social Care. Jessica Kingsley, London, UK

We are grateful to West Sussex Local Educational Psychology Service who have allowed the use of their Emotionally Based School Avoidance Guidance Document.