

Parent Guide



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SEND Support



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What is this resource and how do I use it?

This guide gives information about what Emotionally Based School Avoidance is and how to support your child if they are experiencing EBSA. Use this resource if you are concerned about your child's reluctance to go to school or if they are showing signs of being anxious or fearful about school, such as suggesting they have stomach pains, sore throats or presenting behaviour challenges.

What is the focus of this resource?

Knowledge of EBSA

Practical Support Suggestions

Empowering Parents of Children With SEND

Further Ideas and Suggestions

We have lots of parent support guides in **this category** at the **Parents' Hub**. You might like these informative guides on **ADHD** and **selective mutism**. This **SEND glossary** will help you to understand more about SEND terms and acronyms commonly used.

Parents Blog



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Parents Hub



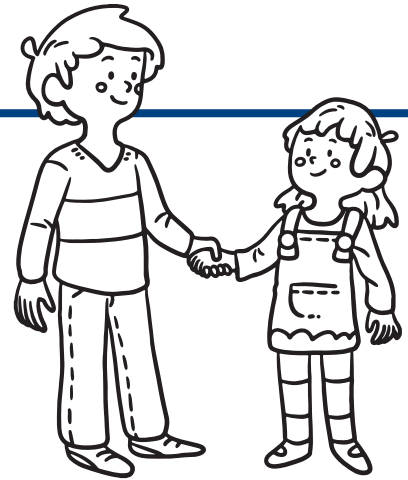
Supporting a Child with Emotionally Based School Avoidance A Guide for Parents



Part One: The Background

What is Emotionally Based School Avoidance?

Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) is a broad term that is used to describe children and young people who have terrible difficulty in attending school for emotional reasons, which can cause long periods of absence.



EBSA is not the same as being truant. Emotionally Based School Avoidance is commonly associated with emotional and physical distress and an unwillingness or inability to attend school, which can cause further anxiety about school. It can affect a child or young adult of any age even if they have previously been happy to attend school.

Terms Associated with EBSA



Language is very important when it comes to EBSA and the terms used can have both positive and negative connotations. Sometimes Emotionally Based School Avoidance is also referred to as:

- Persistent School Non-Attendance
- School Attendance Barriers
- Not Fine in School
- School Refusal



The above terms infer that the problem is with the child rather than the environment. This can lead people to attempt to try to get the child to fit in with the environment, rather than viewing the difficulty as the environment and addressing changes to enable the child to flourish.



Anxiety-Based School Avoidance

This is sometimes used as an alternative to EBSA, although the use of 'avoidance' in both terms raises concerns with some parents and advocates regarding it being a choice the child is making.

Anxious Non-Attender

Some experts in the field use the term 'anxious non-attender', which moves away from the idea of 'refusal' or 'avoidance' being a choice the child is making.



Push and Pull Factors

There are a range of factors that feed into EBSA. These factors can either increase a child's ability to attend school or reduce it which means they will be more likely to stay at home. These factors are referred to as push and pull factors.

Push and pull factors can affect both children and parents and feed into a child's EBSA. The tables below give some examples of push and pull factors for both children and parents. The table is broken down into different overall areas: environmental, school and person-centred.

Environmental

Push (increases attendance)

Pressure from adults at home to go to school

Working adults mean child can't stay at home

Peers attending school

Good social group and relationships

Good routines - sleep, meals etc.

Pull (reduces attendance)

Parental illness (illness of adult family members)

Liking the safety/flexibility of home routines

Liking toys at home

Friends self-isolating or being away from school creates a sense of unfairness

Less sensory stimulation at home (visual/auditory)



School

Push (increases attendance)

Positive transition to school

Good relationships with teachers and friends

Needs are identified and met

Sense of belonging

School has good safety systems

Pull (reduces attendance)

Difficult transition to school

Bullying

Needs not being met

Friendship difficulties

Unrealistic expectations and pressure of learning/exams

Relationship with teacher breaks down

Dislike of certain lessons



Child-Centred

Push (increases attendance)

Good awareness of feelings and triggers

Aware of ANTs (automatic negative thoughts)

Motivated to attend to achieve goals

Pull (reduces attendance)

Under-developed self-regulation and awareness

Negative thought cycles

Lack of motivation

Post-pandemic anxiety

Sensory challenges

Negative previous experiences
related to school



Environmental

Push (increases attendance)

Parent needs to work and can't stay home with children

External pressures that children are expected to be in school (society)

Pull (reduces attendance)

Post-pandemic/COVID concerns

Concerns of the school environment

School

Push (increases attendance)

Friendly staff demonstrating understanding towards parent and child

Pull (reduces attendance)

Staff/management unapproachable, unreachable or show a lack of understanding

Bullying or other issues occurred with little resolution

Limited support

Poor communication



Child-Centred

Push (increases attendance)

No over attachment (parent will be okay without child and vice versa)

Motivation for a child to learn and succeed at school

Parents aware of their own ANTs and model how to manage them

Able to see things from a positive or alternate point of view

Pull (reduces attendance)

Concern staff won't be able to manage child's behaviour or behaviour may cause embarrassment

Personal social anxieties

Long- or short-term parental illness

Own separation anxiety

Poor experiences of school

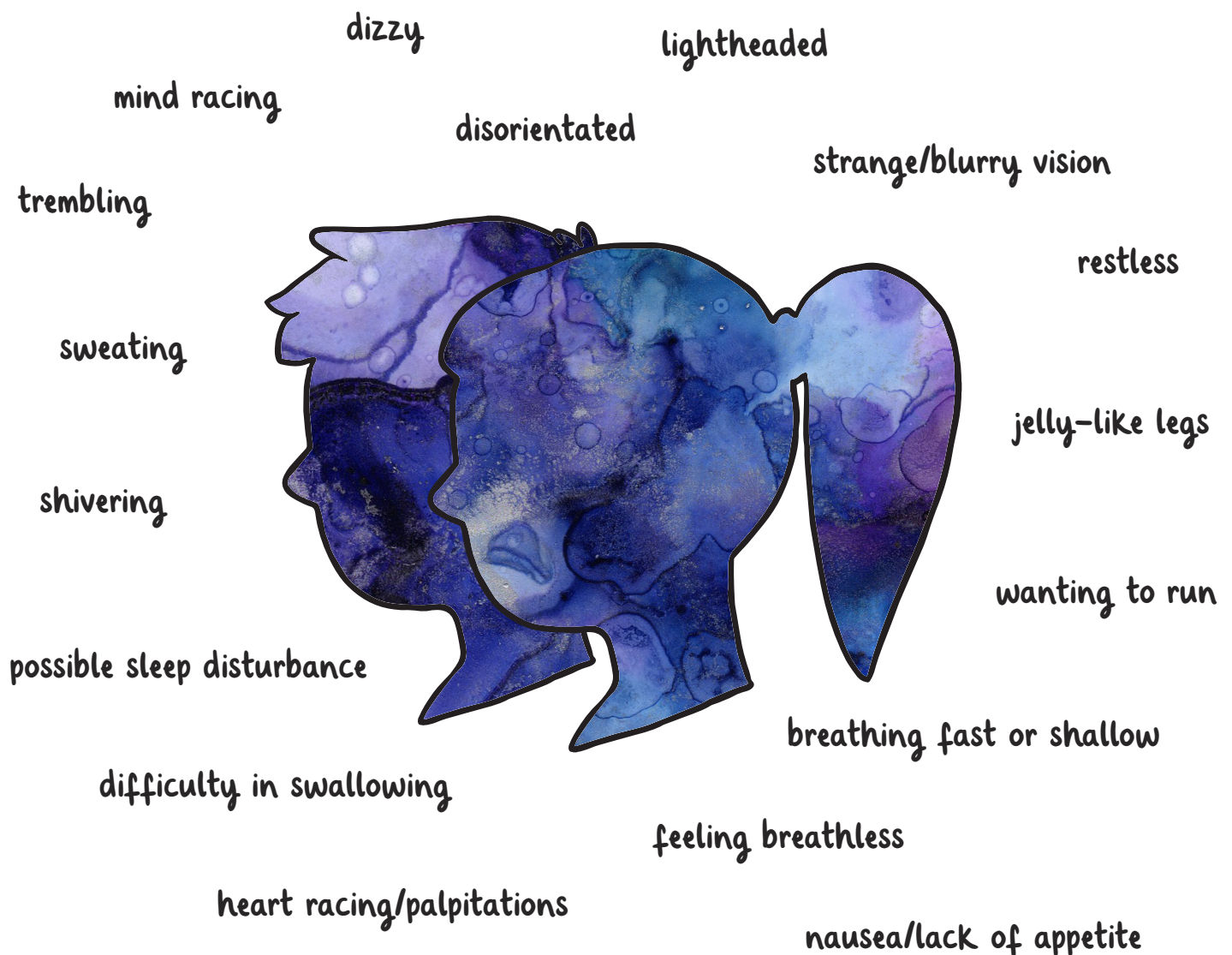


As these tables show, there is no single cause of Emotionally Based School Avoidance. There are multiple factors that come into school avoidance.

What is the role of anxiety?

Anxiety is a physiological response to a perceived threat - it can feel scary and unsettling. It is important to support children and young people to recognise the early signs of anxiety and develop relaxation approaches to manage their feelings. Over the last few years, there have been many changes both in and out of school which have contributed to the mental and physical wellbeing of children and young people. While a little anxiety or stress can be positive, anxiety becomes a problem when it outweighs our ability to cope. Children with EBSA can often feel anxious about attending school.

Anxiety can feel different for different people. Here are some examples of what it can do to our body and mind:



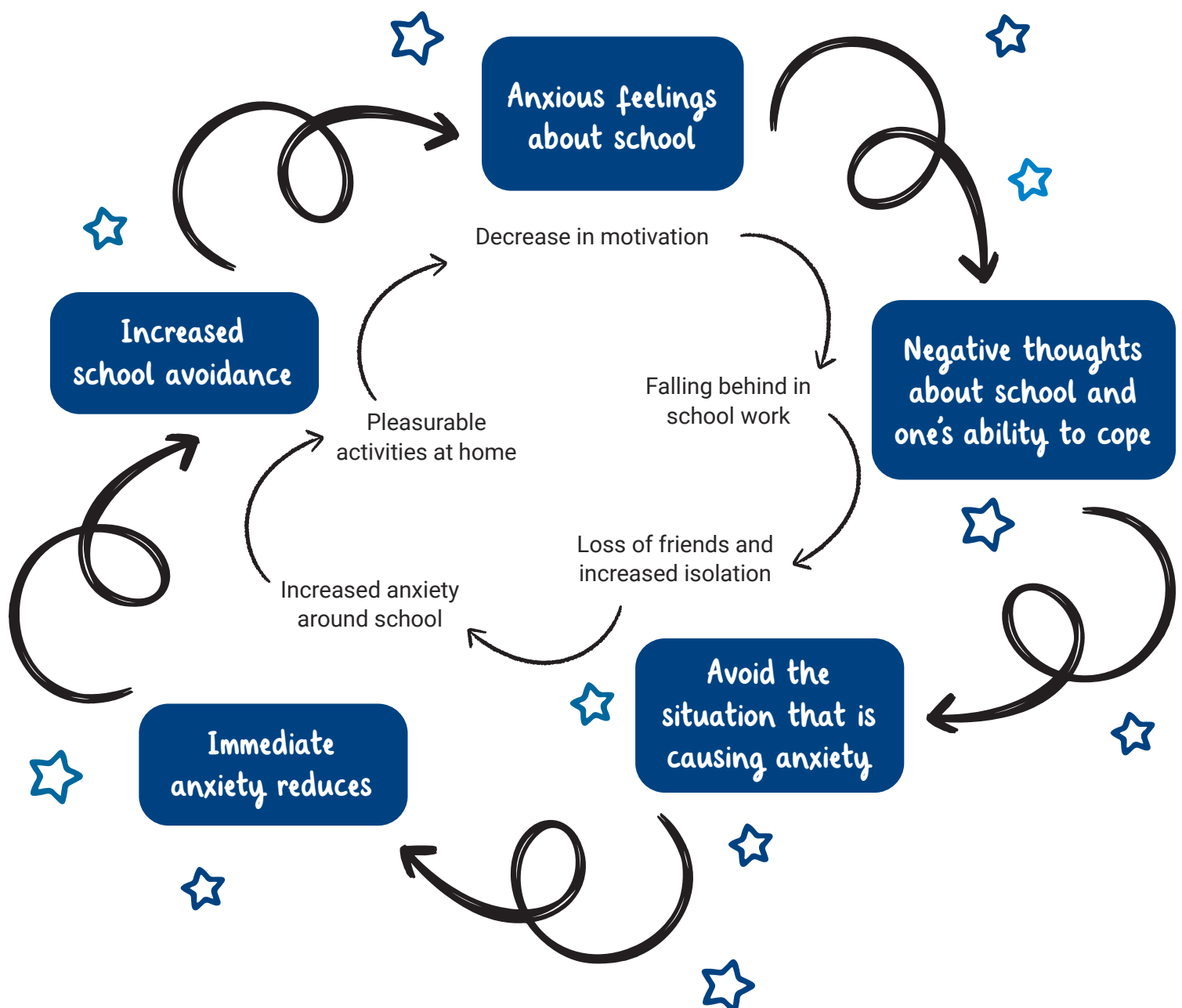
Children and young people experiencing EBSA will experience many of these symptoms when it comes to attending school.

The most common way to manage anxiety is avoidance as this gives us immediate relief. As parents, we can sometimes think it's 'kinder' to allow them to avoid the situation. Unfortunately, it also increases anxiety the next time they are faced with the same situation.

Part Two: How to Manage Anxiety Based School Avoidance

Is your child worried about going to school?

High levels of absence can have a negative impact on children's learning and social skills so it's important to address any reasons children may have for not attending school. This diagram shows how EBSA behaviours can develop:



What should I look for?

- You might notice fearfulness, anxiety, tantrums or expressions of negative feelings when your child is faced with the prospect of attending school.
- Your child might complain that they have abdominal pain, a headache or a sore throat often, with no physical signs of illness.

- They might complain of anxiety symptoms that include a racing heart, shaking, sweating, difficulty breathing, butterflies in the tummy or nausea and pins and needles.
- You will notice that these symptoms are absent at weekends and holidays but worse on weekday mornings.

How can you help?

- There are a lot of contributing factors and triggers to Emotionally Based School Avoidance. Remember that it is in no way the fault of your child or yourself.

- As we saw in 'push and pull', there can be a range of factors that contribute to a child or young person's EBSA. One of the key ways you can support your child is by calmly listening to them and acknowledging their fears because those fears are real to them. It is also important to reassure them that you and the school will work with them to make school a happier place for them.

- Communicate with the school as soon as possible. Your child's school should work in partnership with you to address the issue and make a plan to support your child in attending school.

- The approach you take needs to be something that all adults agree to and stick with, taking into account the child's specific needs. The approach will need to be both firm and consistent. All parties need to maintain consistency and be a positive united front for your child.

- You will need to be prepared that, initially, your child may demonstrate more anxiety and unhappiness as they work through this new system. As much as possible, try to anticipate the difficulties and have solutions ready. Keep an optimistic approach - if your child doesn't attend school one day then begin afresh the next day. Expect that there will be more difficulties at the start of the week and after the holidays and prepare for this in advance.

- Parents will often be tempted to change schools. Carefully consider your child's pushes as research suggests that difficulties will re-emerge in the new school. Try to first resolve the issue in your child's current school.

- It can be really hard to see your child unhappy. It's important that you have someone you can talk to about this - it could be a friend, family member or professional.

How can I help my child to feel calm when they are feeling anxious about going to school?

Relax Your Body

Sit or lay down somewhere comfortable. Squeeze and tense your body while you count to 10. Then relax. Repeat 5 times.

Do some physical exercise. Try this routine: 5 star jumps. 5 press-ups. 5 laps running around your garden. Or 10 seconds of running on the spot. Repeat this routine 5 times.

Try some [Back to School: Breathing Techniques](#) or some gentle yoga which can distract the mind and help your child relax.

Relax Your Mind

Take a slow breath in through your nose for about 4 seconds.

Hold it for 1 or 2 seconds. Slowly let it out through your mouth for about 4 seconds. Wait 2 – 3 seconds before taking another breath. Repeat 5 – 10 times.

Write or draw each day something good that happened to you or something in your life that makes you happy.

Having a few mindful moments in the morning can be really valuable; try this [Morning Mindfulness Booklet](#). Every child is different so take a look through these [Easing Anxiety strategies](#) to find what works for your child.



What can you expect from your child's school?

- Your child's school should listen carefully and acknowledge the challenges faced by your child and yourself. Speak to the school **SENDCo** about this so they are fully aware of the situation.
- School should maintain close contact with you and your child even during long periods of absence in a positive way. An agreed member of staff should be named as a link person.
- The school should work in partnership with you and your child to find out what challenges your child is facing and to find ways to address them and make the school environment a more positive place.
- Regular meetings should be held with you (and your child if appropriate) to devise, review and adapt a plan that will help your child return to school.
- They should respond promptly to any school-based issues, for example, bullying, academic support or social relationships.
- The school should implement appropriate support as part of your child's morning routine, for example meeting a friend or key member of staff at a specific time, using a quiet settling space before school starts or engaging in a preferred activity.
- If challenges persist, the school may suggest support from other professionals and external agencies, such as an **educational psychologist**.

How can I start a conversation with my child?

If you are concerned about your child's feelings around school and want to be able to start a conversation about it, then try some of the following activities.

Any information that you gather from these conversations with your child will help you when you are ready to discuss your concerns with the school. Try not to lead the conversation and reassure them that they can share any thoughts or feelings and they won't get in any trouble.

1. How do you feel about going to school? Circle as many of these as you want.



I feel worried
about school.

I wish I had
more friends.

I am a good
learner.

I feel
embarrassed.

I have lots of
friends.

I don't like the
noise.

I feel worried at
home.

I have one
special friend.

I worry about
school work.

I would rather be at
home than at school.

I enjoy learning.

I don't like changes
in my routine.

I need lots of help
with my work.

I want people to
like me.

I can do things
if I really try.



I don't understand what
the teacher is saying.

I worry about
playtime/lunchtime.



2. Discuss with your child what they like and what they don't like about school. Children will sometimes be very general and say things like 'nothing' or 'everything'. If they do, try giving them some different options, for example, 'Choose one good thing and one not so good thing from this list: what you eat for lunch, maths or science experiments.' Repeat this until you have three things for each section then you can discuss why they like or don't like these things.



What I Like About School

What I Don't Like About School

What I Like About School

What I Don't Like About School

What I Like About School

What I Don't Like About School

4. Ask your child to draw two pictures; one of them doing something they really love to do at school and one of the things they dislike the most about school.



Disclaimers: We hope you find the information on our website and resources useful. As far as possible, the contents of this resource are reflective of current professional research. However, please be aware that every child is different and information can quickly become out of date. The information given here is intended for general guidance purposes only and may not apply to your specific situation.

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