

Emotionally Based School Avoidance

Understanding what it is, what it can look like, and why some children find school difficult.

Today's Purpose

- * Working together to understand barriers and identify practical support

Share
practice

Our current
approach to
EBSA support

Listen

What helps, what
hinders, what
should school
understand

Next
steps

Practical next
steps that can
strengthen our
approach

What is EBSA?

In simple terms

EBSA describes difficulty attending school because of emotional factors. It can range from missing particular lessons to struggling to attend school at all.

An important shift in language

"School refusal" can sound as though a child is simply choosing not to attend. EBSA recognises that non-attendance may be a coping response to anxiety, fear, overwhelm or a perceived sense of threat.

What can EBSA look like?

There is no single "EBSA" child. The signs can be very different.

- * Difficulty getting up, dressed or leaving the house on school mornings.
- * Physical symptoms: headaches, nausea, stomach pain, sweating, shaking or feeling sick.
- * Anxiety that starts the night before – or even several days before school.
- * Patterns: particular days, lessons, activities, transitions or after a holiday.
- * Frequent requests to go home, visits to medical/pastoral staff or leaving lessons.
- * Withdrawal: becoming very quiet, shutting down, avoiding eye contact or putting their head down.
- * Anger, arguments, outbursts or apparently oppositional behaviour
- * A child who genuinely wants to attend but feels unable to manage it.

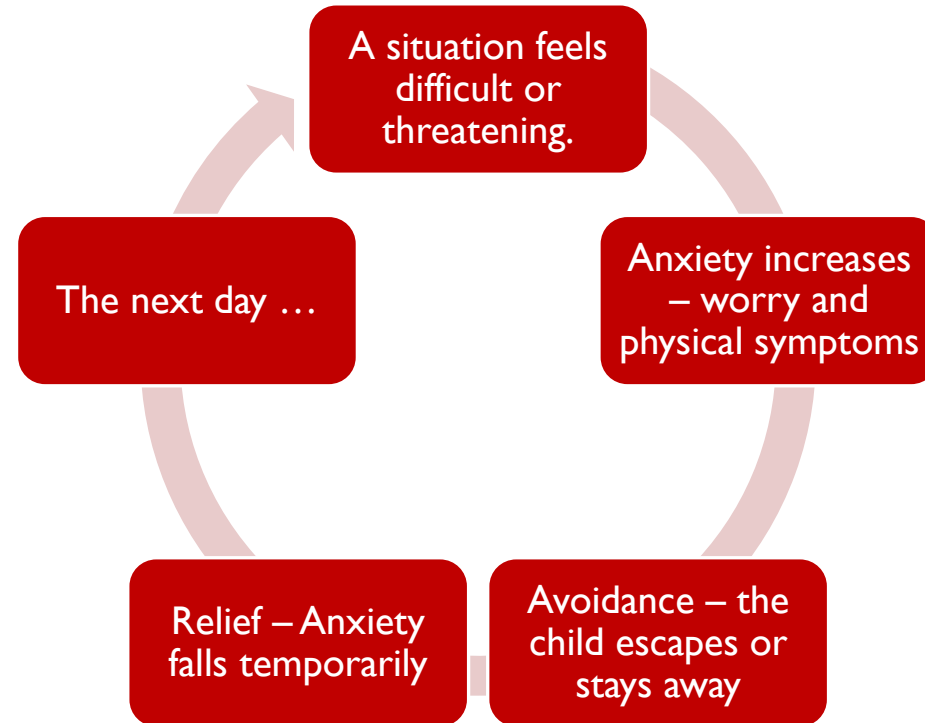
Different presentations of EBSA

The same underlying distress can produce very different behaviour.

Flight	Freeze	Fight
Avoiding or escaping the situation • Refusing to leave home • Leaving school or lessons • Hiding, going home early • Frequent absence	Becoming overwhelmed and shutting down • Silence or withdrawal • "I don't know" responses • Difficulty starting work in class • Appearing detached or absent	The distress comes out as external behaviour • Anger or irritability • Arguing or refusing • Verbal/physical outbursts • Seeming oppositional

Why can the pattern become harder over time?

Avoidance brings immediate relief – but makes the next school day feel even harder.



Early identification with understanding and appropriate support can help to break the cycle.

What might be behind EBSA?

Usually there is more than one factor – and the picture is different for every child.

The child	School	Home and Life
Anxiety Confidence Previous experiences Neurodevelopmental needs Self esteem Perfectionism	Relationships Peer difficulties Workload Transitions Sensory environment Particular lessons Reasonable adaptations not in place	Family change Stress Caring responsibilities Illness Disrupted routines Significant events

There can often be a combination of these factors. A child may cope well with a difficulty in one area but struggle when several pressures build up together. Understanding the function of the avoidance is more useful than simply asking, "why won't they go?"

Is EBSA becoming more common?

The honest answer: attendance difficulties have increased, but national EBSA prevalence is not measured.

What we can say with confidence

- * Persistent absence in England was 10.86% in 2018/19
- * It rose to 18.14% in 2024/2025
- * Secondary school PA in England was 21.53% in autumn 25/26.

But we should be careful

- * EBSA does not have a single agreed national definition or a dedicated attendance code so we cannot accurately report its prevalence.
- * The increase in absence tells us attendance difficulties are more widespread than before the pandemic but we don't know how much of that increase is EBSA.

A helpful way to think about it

Not simply ... "They don't want to go." Look underneath the behaviour and ask what makes attendance feel difficult.

But perhaps ... "Something about school currently feels too difficult, threatening or overwhelming."

The goal ... Understand the barrier, reduce stress, build confidence and help the child reconnect with education.

Current Strategies

Discussion:

- * What is working, and what could we improve?
- * Which strategies have you found helpful in supporting your child?
- * What has been less helpful, or hasn't worked for your family?
- * What could we do differently?
- * Please share as much or as little as you feel comfortable with.

Signposting

EBSA Coffee morning Sept 2026



Support advice and information



Young Minds: school anxiety

Advice for parents on school anxiety, support at home and returning to school.



Liverpool CAMHS:

Understanding EBSA and how families and schools can work together.



Understanding EBSA:

A parent guide to signs of EBSA and ways to support your child.



Action for Children:

Practical advice when your child feels too anxious to attend school.