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| Summary Notes Spot and Support: Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) |

## Introduction

This course is designed to help you gain an awareness of what is meant by Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA). We will consider what it is, the risk and protective factors as well as what we can do to support those with EBSA.

* Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) refers to children and young people with challenges surrounding school attendance.
* It is not truancy but psychologically based and can be attributed to a range of factors.
* Governmentally, non‐attendance is documented collectively and is referred to as ‘Persistent absence’ (Department for Education, 2020).
* EBSA is more prevalent in secondary schools but has an equal gender distribution.
* There is some conflicting evidence about socioeconomic factors but government data points towards socioeconomics being a correlate particularly since the pandemic (Department for Education, 2020).
* Maynard *et al.,* (2015) found that nearly 50% of clinic referred CYP categorising by school non-attendance have an anxiety disorder.
* Crump *et al.,* (2013) found children with mental health difficulties had the highest rates of absenteeism.
* The Emotional School Avoidance Cycle is helpful to understand EBSA from the perspective of a CYP. Essentially, it can be seen that anxious feelings and negative thoughts about school leave to avoiding the stressor such as by not attending school which then negatively reinforces the behave as avoidance will minimise their anxiety. This then leads to increased school avoidance which can become more entrenched the longer it persists. Sometimes school avoidance is also positively reinforced through Engagement in out of school activities which seem more exciting e.g. daytime parties, having a lie in or playing videogames etc. As we can see, young people are not to blame for responding to anxiety in this way. You can find a copy of the cycle here on page 7: <https://www.staffordshire.gov.uk/Education/Access-to-learning/Graduated-response-toolkit/School-toolkit/EPS-COVID-19-recovery-materials/Emotionally-based-school-avoidance/Emotionally-Based-School-Avoidance-Guidance-SCC-EPS-Sept-2020-PDF.pdf>
* We do need to be supportive and intervene as early as possible because the longer they are out of school, the greater the anxiety will as the further behind they will become. The cycle will build and strengthen so we need to break it.

Think of a young person who might be a school avoider as a result of emotional or psychological causes, they might be imagined or real...what could their needs be?

## Risk factors

There are a myriad of risk factors of EBSA which initiate or prolong it. Here are some of the main ones:

•  Social isolation

•  Bullying

•  Lack of feelings of belonging within the school community

•  Poor relationships with staff (Teacher-child relationships that are emotionally supportive rather than only focusing on instructional support are suggested to be more beneficial Mcnally and Slutsky, 2018).

•  Not being challenged academically which may lead to feelings of boredom

•  Perception that work is too difficult and goals unachievable

•  Conflict at home, Caring responsibilities or financial pressures which make it more pertinent to the young person to stay or do their bit to help.

• Residing in unsafe/high crime neighbourhoods which may make it more intimidating to leave the house.

How would you now describe what a person with EBSA might need?

## Protective factors

There are also protective factors which we can consider to reduce the risk or to inform re-engagement support plans:

• Early intervention and nipping the problem in the bud before it manifests further is integral to supporting a young person.

• Systemic working: working with families, school staff and the young person

• Formulating and intervening according to individual case presentation

• Emphasis on the need for a rapid return to the educational setting alongside intervention, support and adaptations with the school and home environment.

How could you summarise the risk factors to a colleague?

## Supporting in school

This section is designed to promote thinking around school-based strategies:

* As per the public health England guidance, a whole school or whole college approach is effective in supporting those with EBSA. This section of the training is based upon the guidance from this document.
* The first stage of the model focuses on educational settings creating environments and policies that adopt whole school, evidence-based approaches to promote wellness enhancing, resilient environments and reduce the likelihood of EBSA concerns emerging.
* The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) advises that school settings should be supported to adopt a comprehensive ‘whole school’ approach to promoting the social and emotional wellbeing of children and young people. Such an approach moves beyond teaching and learning to be incorporated in all aspects of school life. Mental wellbeing is not simply the absence of mental illness but is a broader indicator of social, emotional and physical wellness.
* Public Health England (2015) highlighted eight principles to promoting whole school approaches to emotional health and well-being, and builds on the mental health Wheel of Resilience.
* Have you established an open environment towards mental health with policies which adopt a whole school approach? The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) advises that educators move beyond teaching about mental wellbeing but underpinning this approach throughout every aspect of school life.
* Mental wellbeing is not simply the absence of mental illness but is a broader indicator of social, emotional and physical wellness. The Anna Freud Centre defines mental wellbeing as ‘children and young people’s happiness, life satisfaction and positive functioning’. We need to consider the resilience wheel as part of this and work towards a emotionally safe school ethos.
* Consider approaches to heighten self-efficacy and self-worth in CYP as mediating factors of EBSA.
* When you have meetings with parents or carers looking for practical support, you could suggest: Starting with a reduced timetable as this may feel more achievable, Could a change of class/form help? Does their need to be a review of targets or new targets set? Do they need to be let out of lesson 5 minutes early to beat the rush in the corridor?
* Relational based approaches e.g. a key member of staff who can be emotional available to focus on the needs and build up a relationship with the learner, preferably someone who they do not associate with their academic learning.
* For younger students, ask them to draw how their body feels when they are worried. Use an anxiety thermometer or a scale to ask the child what aspects of school they find difficult.
* A systemic approach whereby we consider all of the systems around the CYP has evidence backing its effectiveness also. Parents/carers may help us to understand the push and pull factors for their youngster. All of this can also be useful information when working with mental health services and local councils too.
* Ensure that parents/carers know to let school know of any concerns asap, Ensure they understand that to break the EBSA cycle, there must be a joint approach between school and home, potentially other external agencies too depending on the severity. Also, support parents/carers in understanding that a plan is likely to be needed to support the CYP which may include external agencies also.
* Help parents/carers to understand that every new day is a new leaf. If they didn’t manage to go to school one day, forget that and consider what to do the following day to get them in.

How could you ascertain these specific protective factors which pertain to a certain individual?

## What can be done at home

It is important than parents and carers know that they also have a role to play but also that we remember as educators that supporting a child with EBSA can be very stressful. You may also find that some of the ideas within this section can also be used in school too or that they may fit across both categories:

* Your empathy in how you approach the issue and your ability to develop a compassionate working relationship with the young person, their parents/carers and all school staff will be the key to your success.

### Monday Morning Plans

* This can be the toughest morning for worried young people.
* Consider working with parents to devise a plan or routine which can help them to have a successful Monday morning...This can help to ease them into the week.
* Often if Monday doesn’t go well, there may be a domino effect throughout the rest of the week. Dr Pooky Knightsmith, one of our directors, also suggests that anxiety can be either ‘share it, shelve it or shouted it’. This is something that can be done at home with parents or on their arrival at school. By this she means that some young people may start their day needing to share it...perhaps something happened the night before or perhaps even the day before at school, identifying a member of staff they can go and talk to can help them to start their right. Alternatively, they may prefer to speak to a peer, draw something or write it down. Yes this does cost time, perhaps a few minutes that is better than a days’ worth of disruption or a young person not coming to school because they don’t feel they have anyone to talk to about their feelings.
* This is really helpful for day-to-day niggles however sometimes more deep rooted, longer term issues. Sometimes having the young person shelve their thoughts or feelings so that you can discuss them at a more appropriate time or in a more appropriate place is more beneficial...we can help them to acknowledge their feelings but learn that they can get on with their day and wait to speak to someone who might be better place to support them in exploring their concerns.
* When it comes to shouting it, this is an opportunity to help them to get rid of their anger and frustration. This is useful when you can see that a young person has arrived at school in a heightened state and who would not be able to settle into a lesson easily.
* They don’t have to actual talk or literally shout, but they can consider something verbal, or they could visually scream into their pillow. If you have a space where they can run or do something physical to help to get rid of that extra emotional energy, this can help them to regulate. Alternatively, if it needs to be a quieter activity, could you have them write down their feelings, frustrations, worries, rip them up and throw them in the bin.
* Remind parents and carers to calmly listen to their child and acknowledge that their fears are real. Remind them how important it is to attend school and reassure them that they and the school will work with them.
* It is really important that all adults both at home and schoolwork together to agree a firm and consistent approach. Any concerns about the plan should not be shared with your child and a positive ‘united front’ is recommended.
* Of course, parents want the best for their child, but it is important that we recognize that they may have feelings of guilt or that The education system is judging them as a parent or carer. Help them to turn their feelings of guilt into a ‘what next’ attitude of what can we do together to get them in.

Parents sometimes want to know how they can talk about EBSA...

They could ask these questions to help scaffold regular conversations about how things are going...

1. What were three things you were worried about this week?
2. What can we do to reduce them next week?
3. What were three things that made you happy/calm/relaxed about school?

The third questions is really important as we often only focus on the negatives. It is important that their child realises the positives in their life.

What do you now need to share with parents or carers? if you were going to run a workshop informing parents and carers, what would need to be covered?

## Closing thoughts

### Intervene Early:

* Parents, teachers, support staff and other front-line staff should be aware of the early signs for EBSA. Schools are recommended to begin monitoring attendance on or around 94%.
* Discussions with the CYP, parent/carer and key members of staff should be undertaken as soon as concern is raised to explore why the CYP is so worried, triggering events, individual concerns, etc.
* Based on this, school in collaboration with parents and the CYP should agree an Action Plan for return to school with targets and review dates. If initial attempts to get the CYP back into school have not been successful after the first review, involve relevant external professionals to access

### Work with the family:

* Work with the family throughout as soon as concerns are raised, a designated member of school staff should reach out and establish contact with the parents/carers.
* Staff should be mindful that parents/carers may feel that they will be judged or be in trouble if their child is experiencing EBSA, so should be sensitive to their feelings.
* On-going two-way dialogue with a member of staff at school, to share any concerns/developments on both sides.
* Ensure there is a focus on the positives as well as the issues/barriers. It may be appropriate to have an agreed expectation for format and frequency of contact as well as realistic response times.

### Actively involve the CYP:

* CYPs should be invited to share their thoughts and feelings about what makes school so concerning.
* CYPs can be supported to be directly involved in meetings, when this is appropriate. They are more likely to engage in an action plan if they feel they play an active and important part in the process.

### Develop a personalised, holistic action plan:

* Develop a plan that addresses the specific issues identified during the assessment process.
* The action plan should take into account the context of the school and relationships within that environment, family issues, as well as the individual CYP’s personal concerns and anxieties.
* Intervention often works better if the plan recognises and builds on the CYP's strengths.
* Review regularly.

## Continue your learning

### Courses

* Break the cycle of emotionally based school avoidance (school refusal) <https://www.creativeeducation.co.uk/courses/support-children-who-are-anxious-to-attend-school/XXX>
* Anxiety: Supporting teens to support themselves

<https://www.creativeeducation.co.uk/courses/anxiety-supporting-teens-to-support-themselves/>

* Anxiety: Helping your autistic child to help themselves

<https://www.creativeeducation.co.uk/courses/anxiety-helping-your-autistic-child-to-help-themselves/>

* Helping anxious children feel calm and in control

<https://www.creativeeducation.co.uk/courses/help-your-anxious-child-feel-calm-in-control/>

### Websites

* Department for Education (2020) Statistics: Pupil Absence <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/787314/Guide_to_absence_statistics_21032019.pdf>
* Public Health England (2015) Promoting children and young people’s emotional health and wellbeing. A whole school and college approach. Crown Copyright. Available from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/promoting-children-and-young-peoples-emotional-health-and-wellbeing>
* <https://www.supportservicesforeducation.co.uk/Page/20029>

### Books

* Pooky Knightsmith-The Mentally Healthy Schools Workbook: Practical Tips, Ideas, Action Plans and Worksheets for Making Meaningful Change.
* Tina Rae- It’s ok to not be ok.
* Gillian Shotton and Sheila Burton-Emotional Wellbeing: An Introductory Handbook for Schools
* M.S Thambirajah *et al.,* Understanding School Refusal: A Handbook for Professionals.

## **References**

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### Hutzell, K. L., & Payne, A. A. (2018). The relationship between bullying victimization and school avoidance: An examination of direct associations, protective influences, and aggravating factors. *Journal of school violence*, *17*(2), 210-226.

### Ingul, J. M., Havik, T., & Heyne, D. (2019). Emerging school refusal: a school-based framework for identifying early signs and risk factors. *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice*, *26*(1), 46-62.

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* Maynard, B. R., Solis, M. R., Miller, V., & Brendel, K. E. (2015). Mindfulness-based interventions for improving academic achievement, behavior and socio-emotional functioning of primary and secondary students: a systematic review. *The Campbell Collaboration*.
* Crump, C., Sundquist, K., Winkleby, M. A., & Sundquist, J. (2013). Mental disorders and vulnerability to homicidal death: Swedish nationwide cohort study. *Bmj*, *346*.
* McNally, S., & Slutsky, R. (2018). Teacher–child relationships make all the difference: Constructing quality interactions in early childhood settings. *Early Child Development and Care*, *188*(5), 508-523.