



Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA)

Information for parents and carers

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What is EBSA?

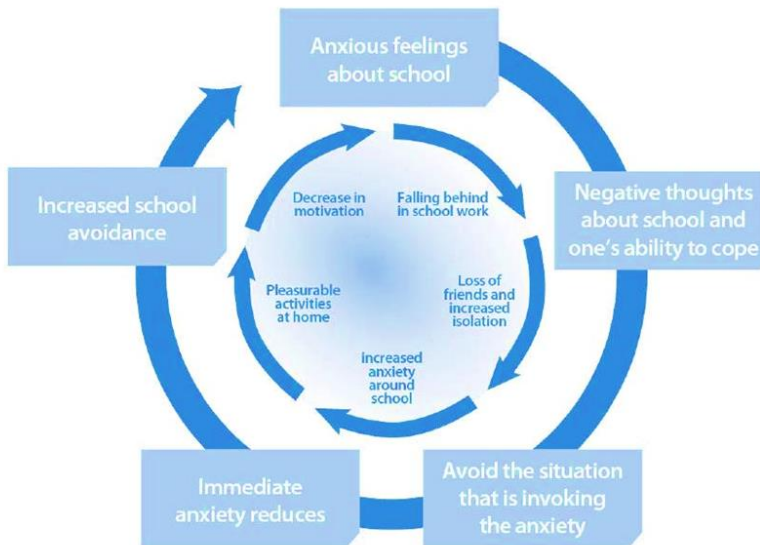
Worrying or anxiety is a normal feeling that we all experience from time to time. It can even keep us safe from harm or help us perform in difficult situations. However, sometimes anxiety or excessive worrying can become a problem especially when it stops people doing what they want or need to do.

Many children and young people worry about school. This is normal. Anxieties are part of life and learning to deal with them is part of growing up. However sometimes a child's worries may lead to difficulties attending school. If your child has high levels of anxiety and does not want to attend school, they may be experiencing Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA).

Is your child worried about going to school?

It is very important to try to help children and young people overcome these difficulties as soon as possible. Absences mean that children miss out on learning and friendships, making it even more difficult when they come back.

The diagram below shows how EBSA behaviours can develop. The longer the problems remain unaddressed the more difficult it becomes to change the school avoiding behaviour.



Signs of EBSA

These could include:

- Fearfulness, anxiety, tantrums, or expression of negative feelings, when faced with the prospect of attending school.
- Complaints of abdominal pain, headache, sore throat, often with no signs of actual physical illness.
- Presenting with challenging behaviour, particularly in relation to specific school situations.
- Being socially isolated and avoiding their peer group.
- Experiencing anxiety symptoms that include a racing heart, shaking, sweating, difficulty breathing, butterflies in the tummy or nausea, pins and needles.
- The symptoms are typically worse on Sunday evening, weekday mornings and absent at weekends and school holidays.

What should you do?

One of the most important ways you can support your child is to calmly listen to them and acknowledge that their fears are real to them. Remind them how important it is to attend school and reassure them that you and the school will work with them to make school a happier place for them. There are some suggestions below.

Tell the school there is a problem **as soon as possible** and work in partnership with the school to address the issue. A plan should be made with the school to help your child. Schools have access to an EBSA toolkit which will help with preventing the risk of EBSA developing or getting worse.

Talking to your child about their worries

Any child currently avoiding school is likely to become anxious when they are asked to talk about their difficulties or returning to school.

A good place to start is to acknowledge that it may be difficult but that you would like to know what they think and feel. If they find it difficult to talk, you could ask them a specific question this might help them start to sort through their fears and feelings. For example:

- What three things are you most worried about?
- Or what three things were you recently worried about?

It is also important to focus on positives:

- What are the three best things about school?

Sometimes children may find it hard to tell you face to face, perhaps you could ask them to write it down, email or text you.

Some children also find it easier to draw how they are feeling.

Remind your child that anxiety and stress are normal and at times helpful aspects of life. We all need to develop ways of coping with these feelings. Feeling anxious or a certain level of stress before something new or difficult has been shown in some situations to improve performance.

What else can you do to support your child

- Take your child to the GP if they are regularly complaining of feeling unwell.
- Reassure and encourage. If possible, try to have your child remember a time that they didn't want to do something and when it turned out okay how they felt afterwards.
- Problem-solve by asking questions – try to understand the reasons why your child is avoiding school. Try not to ask leading questions like “are you worried?” Try to ask open questions like “how do you feel?”
- Encourage your child to find things they can enjoy about the school day (e.g., chatting with friends, PE, art class, lunch time, etc.).
- Work through ways to help your child cope with the scary aspects of school. Look at the pros and cons of each suggestion. Decide which is most likely to work and give it a go.
- Give your child closed choices. For example, ask “do you want to wear your red jumper or your blue jumper?” or “do you want to bring lunch with you or buy it there?”
- Emphasize and reward partial successes.
- Model coping strategies. Keep calm in front of your child.
- Encourage contact with and engage in activities with friends outside of school.
- Maintain good communication and work with the school to put in place strategies that will help your child. Give

the same messages about expecting the child to attend school.

- Try to ignore attempts to get into a debate or to distract you.
- Avoid discussing your doubts and worries with your child.
- Help your child to create and think through solutions and plan together what they need to do. Helping your child solve their own problems shows confidence in them and helps them develop their own problem-solving skills.
- Start a diary to note when your child is reluctant to attend school or complaining of being unwell. See if there are any patterns that might help you understand why your child is reluctant to attend.
- Give your child clear, consistent messages, with an expectation of compliance.
- Set short manageable target, breaking down immediate tasks.
- During school hours, if your child is not in school, limit as much as possible activities (including interaction with relatives and friends) and resources at home that make home more attractive than school.
- Maintain routines. If your child is staying at home, continue to get up and go to the bed at the same time, maintain a day schedule, homework time and relaxation time outside school hours.
- Ensure that you have access to your own network of support.

Carrying out the plan

Towards the beginning of initiating a plan your child may show more unhappiness and you should prepare yourself for this. It is important that all adults, both at home and school, work 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.

It is likely that there may be difficulties implementing the plan and these should be anticipated, and solutions found. You should try to keep an optimistic approach, if your child fails to attend school on one day, start again the next day. It is also important to remember there is likely to be more difficulty after a school holiday, period of illness or after the weekend.

You may feel tempted to change schools, however research tells us that often difficulties will re-emerge in the new school and whenever possible it is normally better to try to resolve the issue in the current school.

Finally, as a parent it can be difficult to see your child unhappy. Make sure that you have someone to talk to too. This could be a friend, family member or an organisation such as those listed at the end of this.

What can you expect the school to do?

- Listen carefully to you and your child. They should acknowledge the challenges faced by your child and you as their parent / carer.
- Maintain close contact with you and your child, even during extended periods of non-attendance. An agreed member of staff should be named as a link person.
- Work in partnership with you and your child to find out what difficulties your child is experiencing and find ways

of making school a happier place and improve their attendance.

- Hold meetings to devise a plan in conjunction with you and your child. The plan should include what the next steps will be.
- Respond to any school-based needs, such as academic support, dealing with bullying or support with social relationships.
- Consider the support your child might require upon arrival at school. This might include meeting with a friend at a specific place and time, using a quiet space to settle before school starts, engaging in a preferred activity or being given a responsibility such as a monitor role.
- If difficulties persist the school should consider requesting involvement from other professionals.

The school can refer to the EBSA Toolkit accessed on Bromley Education Matters.

<https://bromleyeducationmatters.uk/Page/18350> –

Further sources of support

Bromley Y

Access support and webinars for both children and young people and families.

<https://bromley-y.org/>

Bromley IASS

Information, Advice and Support Service (IASS) is a self-referring service which offers advice, information and support to parents or carers of children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) from birth to 25 years old.

You can contact Bromley IASS by email on iass@bromley.gov.uk

Bromley Parenting Hub

The Bromley Parenting Hub pulls together information for all parents in the borough, whether together, separated or considering separation, who want to find ways to improve their relationship and get on better.

<https://bromleyparentinghub.info/>

Bromley Mencap

Bromley Mencap is an independent, self-funded charity working with disabled people, based in the London Borough of Bromley.

<https://www.bromleymencap.org.uk/>

YoungMinds

A charity championing the wellbeing and mental health of young people. They publish a range of information for parents. They also have a parent helpline. Calls are free Mon-Fri from 9:30am to 4pm 0808 802 5544.

<https://www.youngminds.org.uk/parent/parents-helpline/>

Anna Freud

A world leading mental health charity for children and families.

<https://www.annafreud.org/>