



# EBSA GUIDANCE

Emotionally based school avoidance guidance and toolkit for professionals and families.



Developed and collated by  
BFC EBSA team

Bibek Pokhrel, Assistant  
Educational Psychologist

Cornelia Bowen-Mcguire,  
Emotional Wellbeing  
Practitioner

Eleanor Galvin, Emotional  
Wellbeing Practitioner

Hermione Hedges Robinson,  
Youth Worker

Stephen Hammond, Family  
Support Worker

**VERSION**  
1.2

**DATE**  
February 2024

# Contents

Introduction .....	4
Aim/Purpose .....	4
Definition.....	4
<i>What does EBSA look like?</i> .....	4
Prevalence of EBSA .....	6
Anxiety and EBSA .....	7
Anxiety Cycle and EBSA.....	8
Autism and EBSA .....	9
<i>Masking</i> .....	9
School Transitions .....	9
Primary to Secondary School Transitions .....	9
EBSA and COVID-19.....	10
Systemic Approach.....	10
<i>Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner, 1992 Systemic Approach</i> .....	2
<i>Push and Pull model</i> .....	11
<i>Table 1: Systemic Push/Pull Factors template</i> .....	2
Trauma Informed Approach.....	11
Therapeutic Thinking Schools Approach.....	12
What is therapeutic thinking?.....	12
Key Principles of Therapeutic Thinking .....	12
Identification .....	13
How to Identify EBSA .....	13
Early Identification and Management of EBSA.....	13
Risk Factors and Protective Factors .....	14
Parent/Carer, CYP and Staff Voice .....	15
CYP Voice.....	15
Parent Voice .....	16
Staff Voice .....	16
Sense of Belonging .....	16
<i>Plan</i> .....	16
Graduated Response.....	17
A Continuum of Need.....	17
<i>Figure 2: Continuum of presentation of EBSA</i> .....	17
Child/Young Person.....	18

Family .....	18
Tool Kit .....	19
Appendices .....	19
<i>Appendix A – My ‘Can-Do’ Cards (Primary)</i> .....	19
<i>Appendix B – My Circle of Support (Primary)</i> .....	21
<i>Appendix C – My Life Graph (Primary)</i> .....	22
<i>Appendix D – Worry Ladder (Primary)</i> .....	23
<i>Appendix E – My Pupil Passport (Primary/Secondary)</i> .....	24
<i>Appendix F – My Wellbeing Plan (Secondary)</i> .....	25
<i>Appendix G – My Anxiety Playlist (Primary/Secondary)</i> .....	26
<i>Appendix H– Letter to My Future Self (Secondary)</i> .....	27
<i>Appendix I – Making an Anxiety Ladder (Secondary)</i> .....	28
<i>Appendix J – Time to Talk (Primary/Secondary)</i> .....	28
<i>Appendix K – Challenging my Negative Automatic Thoughts (NATs) (Secondary)</i> .....	29
EBSA Pathway .....	2
References.....	30
Main Sources:.....	30
Secondary Sources: .....	30

## Introduction

This guidance has been produced by Brighter Futures for Children and is based on the current evidence-based literature, best practice guidance and information sourced from different Educational Psychology (EPS) services across UK.

A substantial portion of the content incorporated into the document is derived from Dr. Jerricah Holder, Specialist Educational Psychologist who offers an extensive Continuing Professional Development (CPD) course on Emotionally-Based School Avoidance. Find out more via [EdPsychEd | EBSA Horizons | Educational Psychology Online CPD](#).

We would also like to acknowledge Sheffield EPS, Staffordshire EPS, Lancashire EPS, West Sussex EPS and Kirklees EPS. Full references can be found at the end of this document.

## Aim/Purpose

The purpose of our guidance is to provide educational settings with information that emphasises good practice, offers recommendations and resources that enables professionals to work collaboratively with parents/carers to support children and young people (CYP) with Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) needs.

A key objective of the guidance is to facilitate educational settings in their planning, assessment, and intervention of EBSA. It is acknowledged that EBSA is a complex area of need and involvement from other services and professionals as well as including the voice of the families and CYP can be advantageous and appropriate. The scope of the current guidance is to support early and effective intervention for the EBSA population; aiming to prevent EBSA needs from escalating further and promoting positive outcomes for CYP.

## Definition

Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) has been conceptualised as **“a pattern of absence where reluctance, or refusal, to attend or stay in educational settings is rooted in anxiety or fear. This may be the result of an interplay between personal, family, school, or wider environmental issues. It is not a diagnosis, but a special educational need.”** (Rae 2020)

Children and young people experiencing EBSA are highly anxious and usually show significant distress about attending school.

### What does EBSA look like?

CYP may exhibit one or more of the following associated behaviours (Rae, 2020):

- Crying
- Pleading
- Refusal to get ready for school or to leave the house
- Rumination and worry around school-related issues
- Sleep problems
- Psychosomatic illnesses (i.e., headache/tummy ache occurring when no underlying medical cause can be found).
- Defensive aggression (i.e., may display when feeling ‘out-of-control’) etc.

Further symptoms are listed in [Identification](#) section of this document.

## Prevalence of EBSA

UK Literature reveals between **1-5% of the school population** are **absent from school** due to **emotional reasons** (Elliot, 1999; Egger et al., 2003, Pellegrini, 2007, Guildford & Miller, 2015, Katz et al., 2016, Elliott & Place, 2019)

Research states that EBSA is **not specific** to any **population** (Pellegrini, 2007), **sex** (Ingles et al, 2015; Kearney, 2008), **ethnicity** (Pellegrini, 2007) and **socioeconomic status** (King Bernstein, 2001; Pellegrini, 2007).

**Key transition points** within education (5-6 years old and 11-13 years old) have been highlighted as **peak periods for school avoidance behaviours** (Pellegrini, 2007; King et al., 2001).

Research suggests that students with **special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), Autism and ADHD** put them at **increased risk** of developing EBSA (Rae, 2020).

**CYP experiencing EBSA** are **more likely** to experience **emotional and mental health difficulties** such as anxiety disorders and depression (Ek & Eriksson, 2013; Finning et al., 2019)

## Causes and Function of EBSA

Due to the complex nature of EBSA, the causes and triggers of EBSA for each young person can be unique to their experiences. It is likely that various risk factors interplay together to contribute towards EBSA behaviour. Therefore, it is difficult to ascertain a single cause for EBSA. The research recognises that EBSA is often underpinned by 'several complex and interlinked factors including the young person, the family and the school environment' (Thambirajah et al, 2008).

Kearney and Silverman's (1990) review of the literature indicate four main reasons for school avoidance:

- 1.** To avoid unpleasant feelings brought on by attending school (e.g., noise, fear of toilets, constant change, busy corridors, sensory needs).
- 2.** To escape aversive social situations that might be stressful or negative, such as academic demands, social pressures and/or aspects of the school environment
- 3.** To reduce separation anxiety or to gain attention from significant others, such as parents or other family members (e.g. change in family dynamic, concerned about the wellbeing of parent).
- 4.** To pursue tangible reinforcers outside of school, such as playing computer games during school time.

The model suggests that the avoidance of uncomfortable feelings or situations described in the first two points could be viewed as negatively reinforcing the EBSA, whereas in the second two points, the EBSA could be seen as being positively reinforced by factors outside of school (Kearney & Spear, 2012).

The risk factors contributing to EBSA are later discussed in [Risk and Protective factors](#)

## Anxiety and EBSA

“Anxiety is what we feel when we are **worried, tense or afraid** – particularly about things that are about to happen, or which we think could happen in the future.”

As EBSA is characterised by feelings of anxiety, it is important to understand how this can overwhelm our young people.

Worrying or anxious feelings are normal feelings that we all experience. Anxiety relates to the body’s warning signal and is a normal response to a perceived or real threat. It helps us to prepare for a ‘fight or flight’ response to escape the threat by releasing the hormone adrenaline, which provides us the energy to ensure our best chances of survival. Anxieties are part of life and learning to deal with them is part of growing up. There are many young people and children who worry about school, and this is very normal.

However, we should be concerned about a CYP’s anxiety when it starts to interfere with their ability to manage everyday life. Excessive worrying in young people can inhibit them from taking part in social settings, attending school, and building relationships.

Symptoms of anxiety include **feeling restless, being easily fatigued, having difficulty concentrating, feeling irritable, having muscle tension, experiencing problems with sleep.**

The young person may be experiencing anxious and fearful thoughts around attending school and their ability to cope with school related stressors. These feelings may be accompanied by physiological symptoms of anxiety such as nausea, sweating etc. along with a negative sense of self.

To avoid these overwhelming thoughts and feelings, children and young people may operate on a ‘flight’ response and withdraw from school or find other ways to control what feels like a very ‘out-of-control situation’ (Thambirajah et al., 2008).

Kearney and Bensaheb (2006) suggest that anxiety in EBSA can result in a complex presentation of both internalising and externalising behaviours:

<p><b>Internalising behaviours</b> may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• general and social anxiety, worry and fear<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• self-consciousness</li><li>• sadness and depression</li></ul></li><li>• fatigue and bodily complaints (e.g., stomach aches, headache, nausea, diarrhoea)</li></ul>	<p><b>Externalising behaviours</b> may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• defiance and non-compliance</li><li>• running away from home or school</li><li>• verbal and / or physical aggression<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• tantrums</li></ul></li><li>• being irritable, snappy, and demanding</li></ul>
--	---

Avoidance behaviours add to the maintenance of EBSA over time. Though avoiding school can provide temporary relief from anxiety, it does not provide the child or young person with the resilience strategies to return to school, or the skills to manage their anxiety in other situations.

Heyne et al. (2002) suggest that the child's perception of their ability to cope with school, including the social and academic aspects, is a crucial but often overlooked factor in relation to school refusal. **Part of the EBSA Team’s offer to support school in gathering this information.**

Specific anxiety disorders may be present (Kearney and Albano, 2004):

- Separation Anxiety Disorder (22.4%)
- General Anxiety Disorder (10.5%)
- Oppositional Defiance Disorder (8.4%)
- Specific Phobia (4.2%)
- Social Anxiety Disorder (3.5%)

Conduct Disorder is only associated with a small percentage of CYP experiencing EBSA (2.8%)

**Part of the EBSA Team’s role is to undertake emotional wellbeing assessments of young people who are experiencing EBSA.**

## Anxiety Cycle and EBSA

The model below shows how EBSA becomes a vicious cycle that is hard to break.

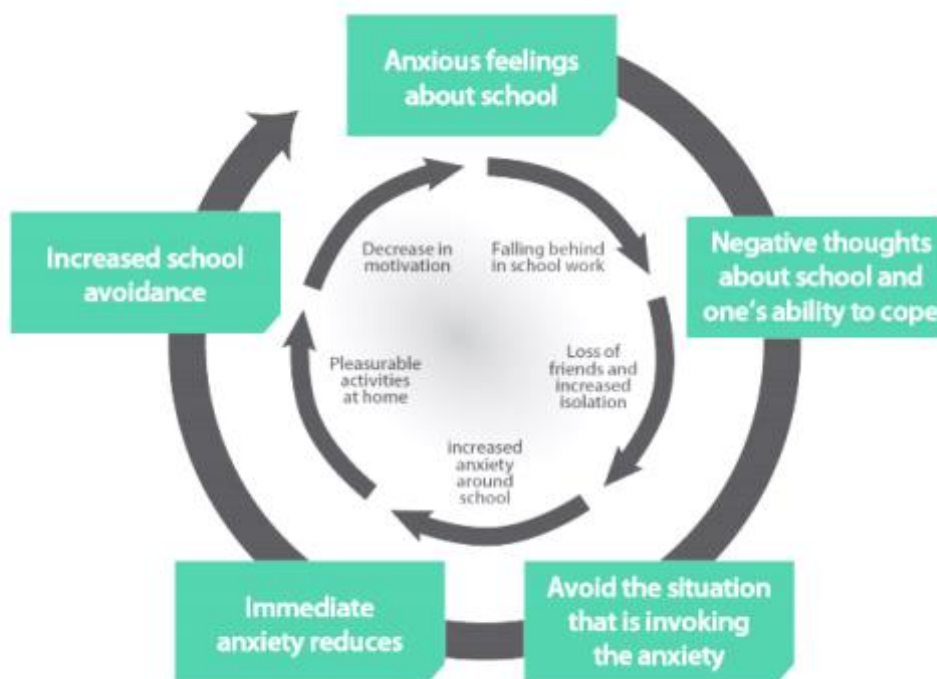


Figure 1: Anxiety Cycle and EBSA – credit Dr Jerricah Holder, EBSA Horizons CPD

When thinking about EBSA we need to consider the individuals’ feelings, thoughts, and physical sensations. These factors determine the CYP’s behaviour or response. For instance, CYP may start to worry about going to school and this may be accompanied by unhelpful thoughts and physical reactions. They may develop a headache, a pounding heart/nausea/diarrhoea.

Individuals experiencing a high level of anxiety often report finding it difficult to stop thinking about a particular situation, which in turn can lead to a more negative thoughts and feelings of helplessness.

Generally, the longer the period of absence, the harder it can be for the individual successfully returned to school. Early identification, assessment and intervention are therefore important in terms of outcome.

## Autism and EBSA

According to the Autism Research Institute, Anxiety disorders are among the common comorbidities of autism spectrum disorder. The research shows that anxiety is more common in people with autism. Autistic CYP can experience difficulties in understanding, predicting, and controlling different aspects of their physical and social domains. This can cause heightened levels of distress depending on their personal combination of difficulties and skills. Research literature suggests that autistic children with anxiety put them at an increased risk of EBSA (Lancashire EPS), in part attributed to difficulties around handling social situations and anxiety around the school environment.

Schools can be very complex social environments for children with autism and therefore they may find school exhausting and overwhelming. The below image highlights some of the aspects that can lead to a young person's anxiety bucket overflowing:



Diagram courtesy of Dr Jerricah Holder, EBSA Horizons CPD

### Masking

Some CYP “mask” their difficulties. For example, O’Hagan et al. (2022) found that school is especially challenging for autistic girls who are “at risk of internalised anxiety which can ultimately lead to school avoidance”. Recognising when a CYP is in distress and helping them to communicate their feelings is important to help reduce their stress.

Helpful resource: [National Autistic Society \(autism.org.uk\)](https://www.autism.org.uk)

## School Transitions

### Primary to Secondary School Transitions

Transitions from primary to secondary schools can present as a significant time of stress for some children. Literature shows evidence that many vulnerable children will need additional support and interventions prior to

transition as secondary school can affect students' academic performance, self-esteem, and motivation (Rae, 2020).

Transition support can include:

- Familiarising children with the context of the school.
- Relaxation of the rules in the early weeks of the initial term
- Procedures put in place to support pupils to adapt
- Visits to new schools, inductions, taster days and useful information booklets.
- Factors that appeared to hinder a successful transition included:
- Bullying (3 in 10 CYP experience bullying according to parents (Rae, 2020))
- Worries and concerns over ability to achieve work
- Worries and concerns over making new friendships

## EBSA and COVID-19

When considering EBSA in our current context, it is important to consider the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. For some children and young people, the return to the routine and familiarity of the school environment will have reduced anxiety caused by the pandemic.

However, it has become highlighted that some children and young people have experienced heightened levels of anxiety regarding the return to school following lockdown and periods of absence. For example, some children with greater levels of anxiety and special educational needs have found being at home safe and nurturing and now feel nervous about returning to the learning environment.

Coming out of lockdowns may have presented as particularly challenging for CYP with autism. For example, the post COVID-19 school environment may have unexpected sensory challenges e.g., the increased noise following extended periods of being at home. Existing difficulties in social communication and handling social situations may be exacerbated by long separation from peers. To support an autistic child back to school after absence from school (either in relation to COVID-19 or school avoidance):

- Act Early – Anticipate CYP's needs more actively than other students.
- Support strongly – Dedicate time to support CYP and individualise the return to school experience.
- Monitor closely – Monitor the CYP's view daily and use this information to assist them and problem-solve.
- Reconnect quickly – Ensure continuation of good practice, child training and programming.
- Communicate clearly – Clear communication between staff members, parents and children should be informative, proactive, and reassuring.

## Systemic Approach

As each case of EBSA is unique, and influenced by a range of home, school and community-based factors, a systemic approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1992) to understanding EBSA is recommended. Bronfenbrenner recognized there are multiple aspects of a developing child's life that interact with and affect the child. His ecological systems theory views child development as a complex system of relationships affected by multiple levels of the surrounding environment, from immediate settings of family and school to broad cultural values and customs.

## Push and Pull model

The literature suggests that contributory factors of 'risk and resilience' can be divided, and understood, in terms of 'push' and 'pull' factors.

- 'Push' factors (i.e. those that push the child towards attending school, or staying at home)
- 'Pull' factors (i.e. those pull the child away from attending school)

For example:

School	Home
<b><i>Push (towards attending school)</i></b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Academically bright</li><li>- Friendships</li></ul>	<b><i>Pull (away from school, home factors)</i></b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Wanting to look after parent</li><li>- Separation anxiety</li><li>- Not sleeping</li></ul>
<b><i>Pull (away from school, school factors)</i></b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Prolonged absence from school</li><li>- Isolated, not leaving the house</li><li>- Academic demands</li><li>- Social anxiety</li></ul>	<b><i>Push (towards staying at home)</i></b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Reducing anxiety by staying near mum</li><li>- Reducing anxiety around attending school</li><li>- Not having to complete school work</li></ul>

Emotionally Based School Avoidance is most likely to occur when 'risks' are greater than resilience, when stress and anxiety exceeds support, and when the 'push' factors that promote school attendance are overwhelmed by the other push and pull factors in the child's life (Thambirajah et al, 2008).

Push and pull factors can occur across the child's system.

## Trauma Informed Approach

The EBSA team uses a trauma informed approach, that is therapeutic and non-judgemental.

Trauma is a response to an event or series of events that causes someone to feel unsafe, threatened and/or severely distressed. It can lead to feelings of intense fear, helplessness, loss of control.

An understanding of trauma and the influence that it has on the brain and body is important to understanding and working with children who are avoiding school due to significant anxiety or fear:

- School avoidance can be traumatic for the child and their family. It often feels beyond their control, and they need guidance and support to get back on track.
- Children who have experienced trauma or traumatic events may find school triggering and difficult at times, which makes them feel out of their window of tolerance.
- School refusal is more prevalent in children on the autism spectrum than among their peers. Children who are autistic may experience the school setting as traumatic, due to anxiety, sensory and social needs.

Many of our Reading schools are committed to being trauma informed, use our Therapeutic Thinking Approach, and are part of our Autism Growth project.

Trauma informed principles used by the EBSA service:

1. Think Trauma informed – understanding every behaviour is a communication; be pro-active in responding to needs.
2. Trauma sensitive assessment - explore what may be contributing to the child feeling unable to attend school.
3. Restorative – Building a relationship-based return to school and build resilience. "There is no more effective neurobiological intervention than a safe relationship, the relationship works to bring the brain back into regulation." ([Bruce Perry, PhD, MD, researcher & child psychiatrist](#))

4. Think 'Whole Family' - Connecting with the whole family.
5. Flexible – explore how different needs can be met.
6. Safe & Responsible – staff are trained on Therapeutic Thinking Schools, emotional and mental health needs.
7. Collaborative & enhancing – meaningful engagement with children about what they need from adults who are supporting them; a resilience-based approach on what has worked in the past and may still work in supporting their emotional wellbeing; create an environment where the child can tell us about their needs
8. Holistic – no judgement in viewing all influences in the problem.
9. Assuming complexity, approaching with empathy. “We know that dysregulated and stressed adults cannot effectively support and help children and young people who are also dysregulated and stressed. It is impossible”. (Tina Rae, 2020 p3).

## Therapeutic Thinking Schools Approach

### What is therapeutic thinking?

Therapeutic Thinking is a philosophy. It focuses on how all children and young people are to be supported to have a positive experience of school, particularly in terms of their emotional wellbeing and mental health; it also helps to develop an understanding of how to respond to those who may be communicating through concerning behaviours. The Therapeutic Thinking Schools approach is a school-led embedded ethos characterised by an inclusive culture, based on training and information that is underpinned by best practice, policy and plans.

Our overarching aim is for children to have the opportunity to flourish in their local school where they are understood, have their needs are met, and where they are prepared for the next stage in their education and lives. The Therapeutic Thinking agenda fits firmly within the Excellence for All shared vision and strategy with its focus on the most disadvantaged and vulnerable learners. Therapeutic Thinking will actively support all stakeholders to act as champions for vulnerable children and to better target resources to improve outcomes and opportunities for all children regardless of their educational or physical needs, their family background, the school they attend or the neighbourhood in which they live.

Therapeutic Thinking will lead to:

- A common language and a joint approach that is followed by all professionals
- Schools and settings that provide a safe and welcoming environment for all parties, where mutual respect and dignity are deep-rooted
- An improvement in attendance and behaviours for learning
- An understanding of the inseparable link between teaching, learning and behaviour
- Improved staff confidence in meeting the needs of the children and young people
- A reduction in the need to positively handle or restrain
- The inclusion of children with difficult or concerning behaviours
- A reduction in the number of Fixed Term and Permanent Exclusions.

It is the aim that Therapeutic Thinking will provide both; the foundation of principles upon which Inclusive Practice is based in East Sussex, but also; the umbrella under which all other interventions and programmes must sit.

### Key Principles of Therapeutic Thinking

Therapeutic Thinking is an approach to behaviour that prioritises the prosocial (positive) feelings of everyone within the dynamic. This is based on the principle that:

- Negative experiences create negative feelings. Negative feelings create negative behaviour.
- Positive experiences create positive feelings. Positive feelings create positive behaviour.

## Identification

### How to Identify EBSA

Identifying CYP who may be at risk of EBSA is important so that links can be made between the family and school to coproduce a re-integration plan. Schools have a key role in prevention, early identification, and continued management of EBSA.

Signs that may appear in CYP with EBSA include:

- Negative talk about school
- Separation anxiety from caregiver
- Psychosomatic illnesses (i.e. headache/tummy ache occurring when no underlying medical cause can be found).
- Refusing to get ready for school
- Difficulties sleeping
- Distress when school is spoken about
- Self-harm behaviours
- Becoming withdrawn
- Crying
- Pleading
- Refusal to get ready for school or to leave the house
- Rumination and worry around school-related issues
- Defensive aggression (i.e., may display when feeling 'out-of-control')

### Early Identification and Management of EBSA

Early identification and intervention have been instrumental in helping CYP with EBSA return to school (Staffordshire EPS, 20XX). Advocating for a quick return to school coupled with intervention, support and adaptations has been shown to have positive outcomes for CYP (Baker and Bishop, 2015). Implementation of an individualised support plans including formulation of factors influencing EBSA and having the plan co-produced by families, schools and the CYP are important to support a CYP struggling with EBSA in school.

In most schools, the attendance officer is typically the first point of contact following contact from a parent or when following up an unexplained absence. Attendance concerns should be then passed to the head of year/head teacher who will arrange a meeting with the parents/carers and CYP. It is important to emphasise that views of the school, parent and CYP are considered for the reintegration plan to be successful.

## Risk factors and protective factors

Risk and Resilience Factors Research has identified a range of contributing ‘risk’ factors to EBSA. West Sussex EPS note that it is often a combination or predisposing factors (in school, family and/or child) interacting with a change of circumstances that leads to EBSA behaviours.

Contributing ‘Risk’ Factors		
School Factors	Family Factors	Child Factors
Bullying (the most common 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 or mental health problems	Challenges with emotional self-awareness and self-regulation
Transition to secondary school, key stage or change of school	Siblings at home e.g. home educated or due to health needs	Fear of failure and poor self-confidence
Structure of the school day	Overprotective parenting style	Physical illness
Academic demands/high level of pressure and performance-orientated classrooms	Dysfunctional family interactions	Age (5-6, 11-12 and 13 and 14)
Ineffective SEN provision	Being the youngest child in the family	Learning difficulties, developmental problems or Autistic Spectrum Condition if unidentified or unsupported
Activities that the child or young person cannot manage (e.g. PE, performing in public)	Loss and bereavement	Anxiety interacting with peers
Transport or journey to school	High levels of family stress	Separation anxiety from parent/worry parent will leave/worry about parent wellbeing
Exams	Family history of EBSA	Traumatic events
Peer or staff relationships difficulties	Young carer responsibilities	

Table 2. Taken from West Sussex EPS (2018), Thambirajah et al (2008) and Staffordshire EPS (2020)

When supporting children and young people experiencing EBSA it is also important to think about the areas of strength and sources of resilience available to them. These can serve to protect a CYP from maintaining EBSA behaviours and promote successful inclusion in school. Again, these have been divided into school, family, and child factors below.

Resilience Factors		
School Factors	Family Factors	Child Factors
Positive relationships with a member/s of staff	Positive relationships in the family and/or community	Individual strengths and interests
Willingness to work in partnership with family and support agencies	Willingness to work in partnership with school and support agencies	Developing ambition and aspiration
Positive relationships with peers	Positive parenting skills	Motivation for change
Experiencing success in school	Developing understanding of the child or young person's needs	Increasing confidence, self-esteem, self-efficacy and value in themselves
Having a flexible approach		
Developing understanding of the child or young person's feelings		

Table 3. Taken from Staffordshire EPS (2020)

## Parent/Carer, CYP and staff voice

### CYP voice

It is crucial to gather the view of the CYP to acknowledge and validate their worries around school. A focus on child voice allows us to develop a shared narrative around the EBSA and helps us to understand the key drivers of the EBSA behaviour. This can ensure the support offered, matches the needs of the CYP and allows us to work in collaboration with the CYP and the family to co-produce a plan which *ensures* the best outcomes for the CYP. Often when re-integration is unsuccessful, there has been a lack of understanding around the key drivers of EBSA and a mismatch in the support and underlying needs of the child. CYP often report feeling rushed and pressured to return to school and feel that their re-integration plans have moved too quickly. Therefore, it is important to ensure a flexible co-produced plan matched with the CYP's needs and aligned with the pace that they feel able to cope with.

It is also likely that EBSA pupils will become anxious when discussing a return to school plan. CYP usually manage anxious feelings by employing the avoidant behaviour of not going to school therefore, any talk regarding school is likely to induce anxiety as this takes away their avoidant coping strategies. An acknowledgement of how difficult this is for the CYP is recommended, whilst making them aware that their worries and thoughts around school is important to us. It is important for us to not dismiss the CYP's worries, and to empathise with them without promoting EBSA.

Considering who the CYP has a good relationship with, and which member of staff makes them feel the most comfortable is also of equal importance as they may be best placed to gather their thoughts and worries around EBSA. Different tools can be adopted and tailored to the CYP's individual strengths and needs, based on their age, level of understanding and language.

Visual prompts and drawings can be helpful to facilitate a conversation as many CYP struggle with verbalising their needs, thoughts, and feelings. Several tools to support this have been included in our centralised guidance.

## Parent voice

Parents of children who find it hard to attend school because of their fear or anxiety, are likely to experience high states of emotion as well. They are likely to feel extremely stressed, and overwhelmed, and need support to improve their current situation. To help and enable the child to return to school, parents and professionals need to work closely together; our trauma informed approach means we will build trust and positive rapport with parents, be sensitive to their concerns, emotional capacity and actively listen to their experiences from a non-judgemental, empathetic stance. The active collaboration between parent, school, child, and other professionals can help us to develop and implement a tailored plan for the CYP for the most successful outcomes. Research and evidence show a supportive, collaborative approach is the most effective way in promoting school attendance and emotional wellbeing.

Educational settings should allocate a member of staff, to regularly communicate with parents/carers and other involved support services to help with information gathering and facilitate the return to school plan. A solution-focused approach and use of exception finding questions is helpful to shift the focus away from the presenting problem and help us to consider aspects within a situation which are working well or supporting the young person not to get worse. Examples of questions to explore background information, as well as the strengths and protective factors within the family, are provided in this guidance.

## Staff voice

In order to gain a holistic understanding of the EBSA behaviours, information should also be collected from school staff closely working with the young person. This can include seeking information from subject teachers, teaching assistants and pastoral staff. The CYP may show different strengths and difficulties across different environments and subjects. This information will provide us with a comprehensive view of the CYP EBSA behaviour within various contexts. Each staff will have valuable information which can help to identify triggers and strategies to support the CYP.

It may also be that the CYP has unidentified special educational needs, medical needs, or a disability. If they are not already involved, school staff should consult with the school's special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO).

## Sense of belonging

Belonging refers to the sense of being somewhere you can be confident that you will fit in and be safe in your identity: a feeling of being comfortable in a place. An intentional whole-school practice has been recommended to help create a climate of welcome and belonging in school. These practices can in turn have positive impacts on CYP mental health and wellbeing. Research into EBSA supports the importance of promoting the voice and agency of young people, working with parents and carers, and adopting a graduated approach to interventions to support social, emotional, and mental health needs as well as concerns around learning, communication, and interaction. A range of tools, strategies and interventions have been provided to support young people who have emotional needs within school settings, and these are best adopted as a whole school approach.

## Plan

Effective planning considers the views of the CYP, family and draws on information from adults working with the CYP. A formulation looking at the different sources of information and views can lead to a shared understanding of an issue and help develop shared goals. These goals can be considered within action and support plans,

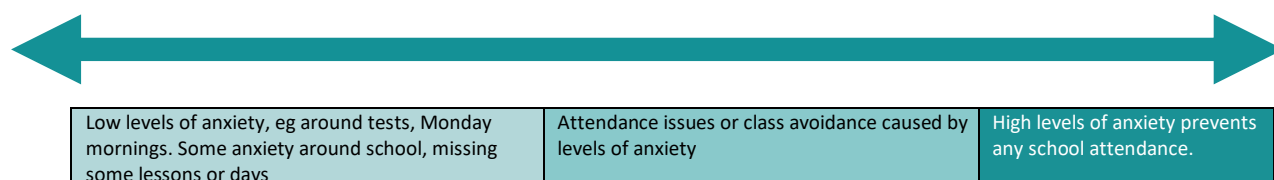
providing a starting point for moving forward. It is essential that the voice of the CYP is heard and considered clearly throughout the plan.

## Graduated response

### A continuum of need

EBSA presents as a continuum of need as illustrated below:

Figure 2: Continuum of presentation of EBSA



For some young people working on a gradual reintegration package, it can be helpful to put together a step-by-step plan that gradually, over time, exposes them to the situations that are anxiety provoking. This gives the individual some control over the plan and hopefully helps them to feel more confident as each step is achieved.

By taking this approach earlier decisions and actions are revisited, refined, and revised with a growing understanding of the CYP needs and of what support will help to secure good progress and good outcomes for them.

It is anticipated that, over time, with gradual and supported access to school and specific situations, the child's anxiety and fears will decrease through a process of habituation and graded exposure to the learning environment.

The Anxiety ladder can be an essential aid to the process when planning a transition back into school. (see [Appendix I – Making an Anxiety Ladder](#))

It is important for schools to offer a graduated response to the CYP using evidence-based interventions to address non-school attendance.

Some questions to ask in planning a school-based intervention are:

- Does the child / young person want to change their behaviour? What is their readiness to change?
- What does their behaviour tell us? What purpose does it serve?
- What do they want to change so they feel able to return to school?
- Are parents/carers in agreement of support?
- What are the aims of the intervention? How will you know once you have achieved them?
- Is there someone who could deliver this intervention that the child / young person has a good connection with?
- Is the person delivering the intervention adequately trained?
- Is an individual intervention appropriate given the child / young person's needs, or are the issues broader (e.g., across home or neighbourhood) and require external agency support?
- Is the CYP mentally and emotionally ready to take part in this intervention?

This should take place through an assess, plan, do, review process thinking about the CYP, family, peers, school as well as wider community. Good practice of this includes:

## Child/Young Person

- CYP to feel a sense of safety and belonging through consistent support staff
- Discuss and build on strengths and interests.
- Opportunities for positive experiences and opportunities to develop friendships.

## Family

- Have positive relationship with parents/carers through regular communication with them
- Discuss with parent/carers what support they need as a family and refer to other agencies if needed
- Encourage the family to spend time together e.g., engaging in shared interests and activities.

**Please see below for tools to help children and young people improve school attendance and feel less fearful or anxious.**

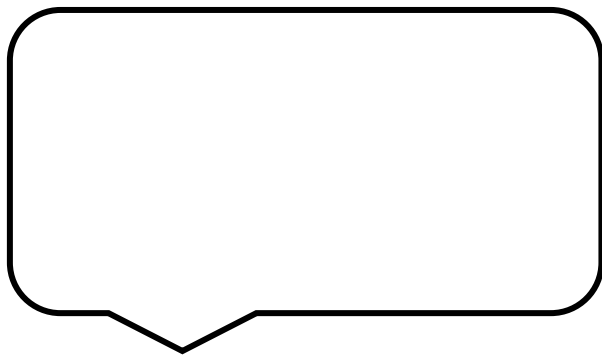
## Tool Kit

### Appendices

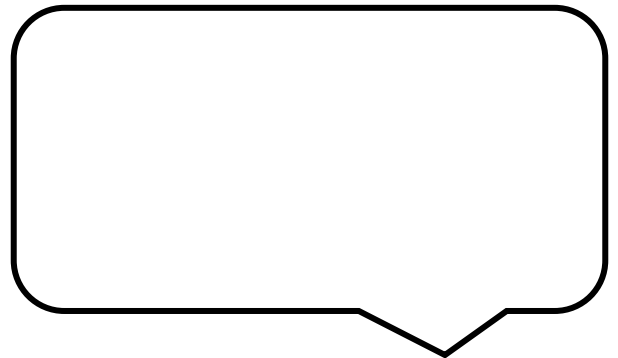
The following appendices represent a mixture of primary and secondary school tools that can be used by either professionals or families.

#### Appendix A – My 'Can-Do' Cards (Primary)

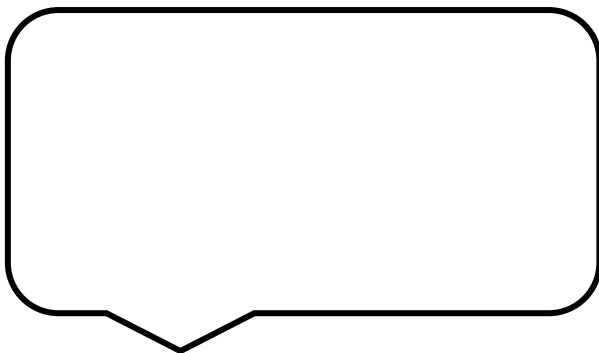
*Record the things that you can do now on the cards. Draw yourself doing them in the speech bubbles. If you can't do them now, don't worry. You can't do them yet! Use the blank cards to add some more things you might be able to do in the future and then think about when you might be able to do them.*



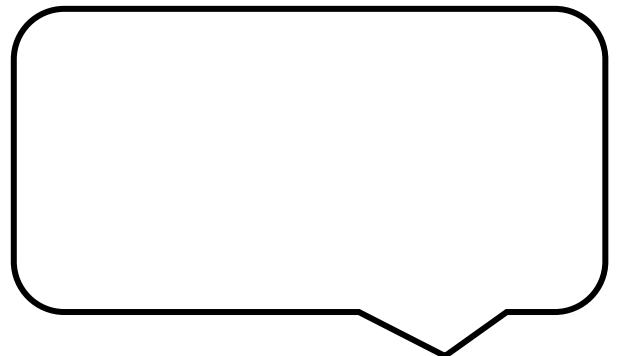
I can talk about  
going to school



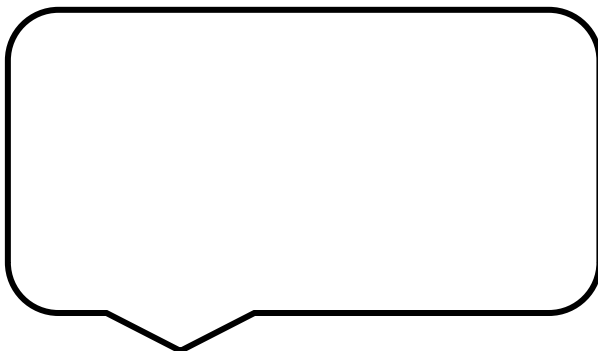
I can walk past my  
school



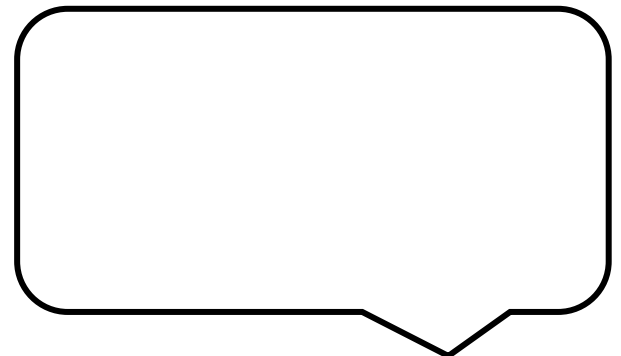
I can try on my  
school clothes



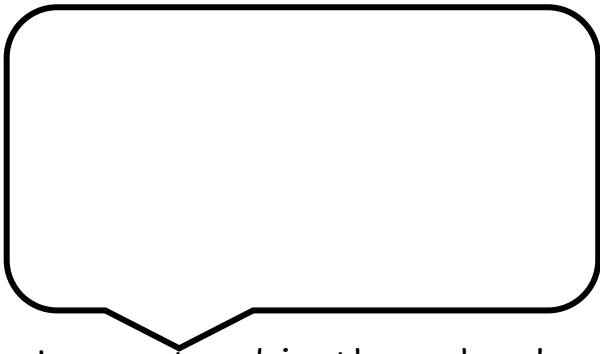
I can look at the  
school website



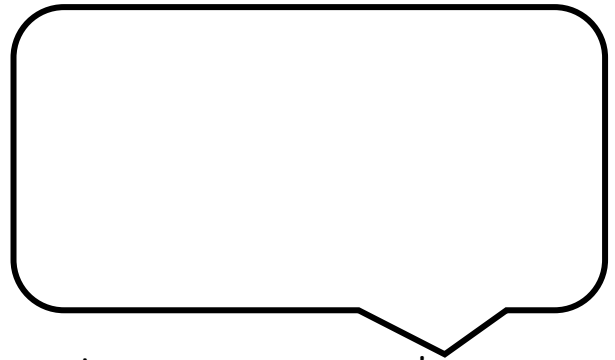
I can talk to my  
friends from school



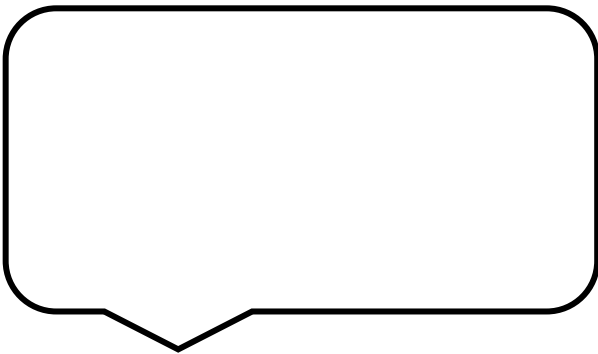
I can send a message  
or a picture to my  
teacher



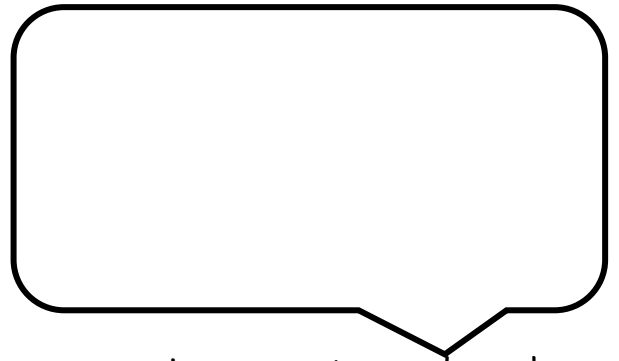
I can stand in the school entrance for a few minutes and then go home.



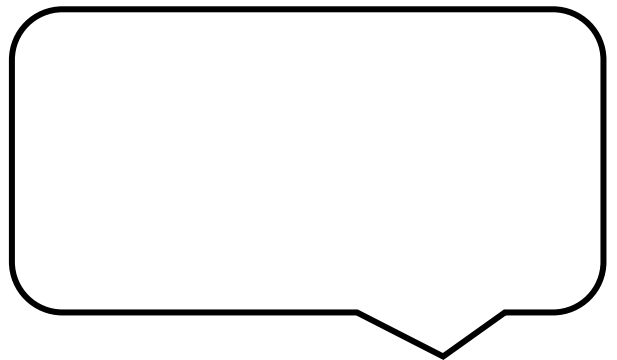
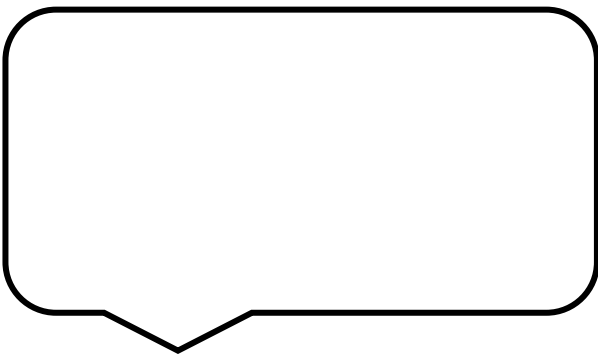
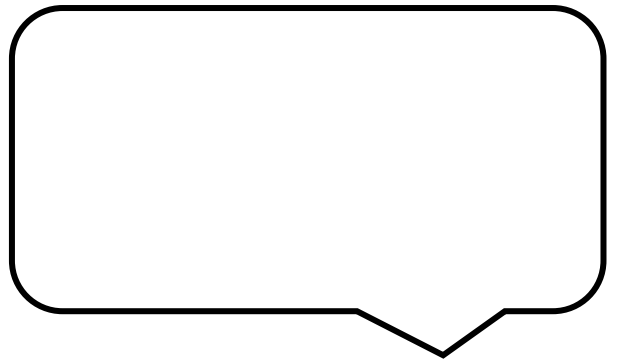
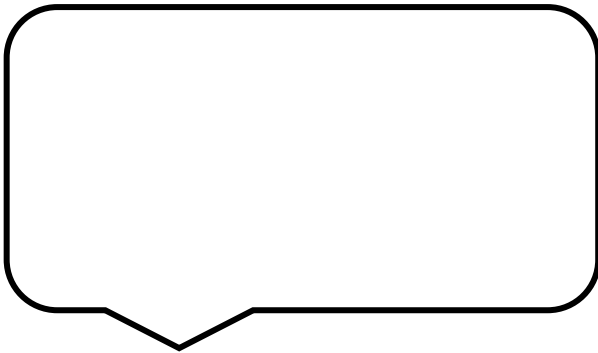
I can go to my classroom after school to say hello to my teacher



I can stay in school for one lesson



I can eat my lunch at school



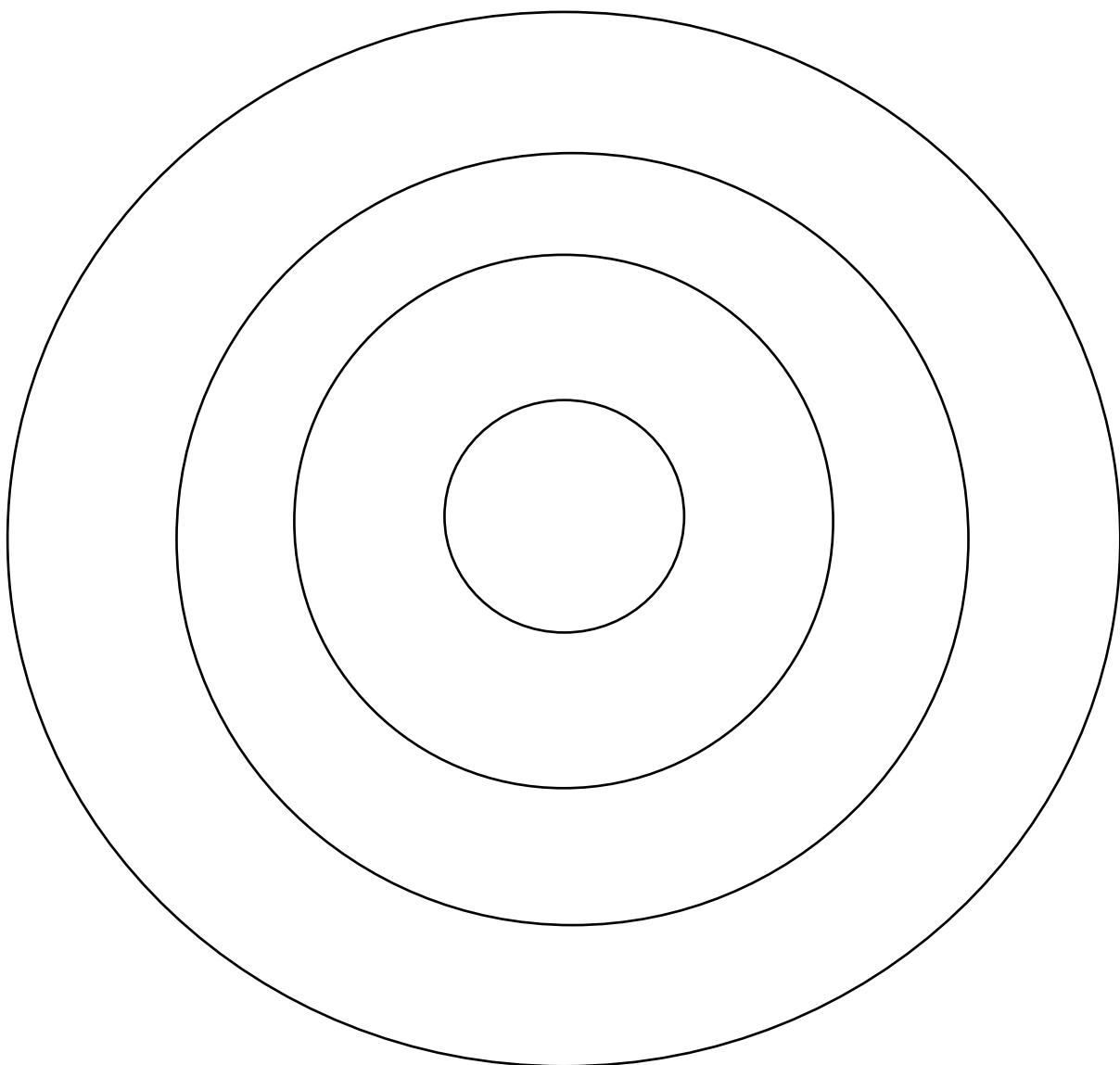
## Appendix B – My Circle of Support (Primary)

*Write the names of all the people in your life who can and do give you support, using the circles on the next page.*

- 1. Start by writing the names of those closest to you in the centre circle.*
- 2. In the next circle put those less close, but still very important – your friends?*
- 3. In the next circle write the names of any groups or teams you are part of*
- 4. Then move out to the final circle and put the names of people who are paid to support you – teachers, doctors, nurses?*

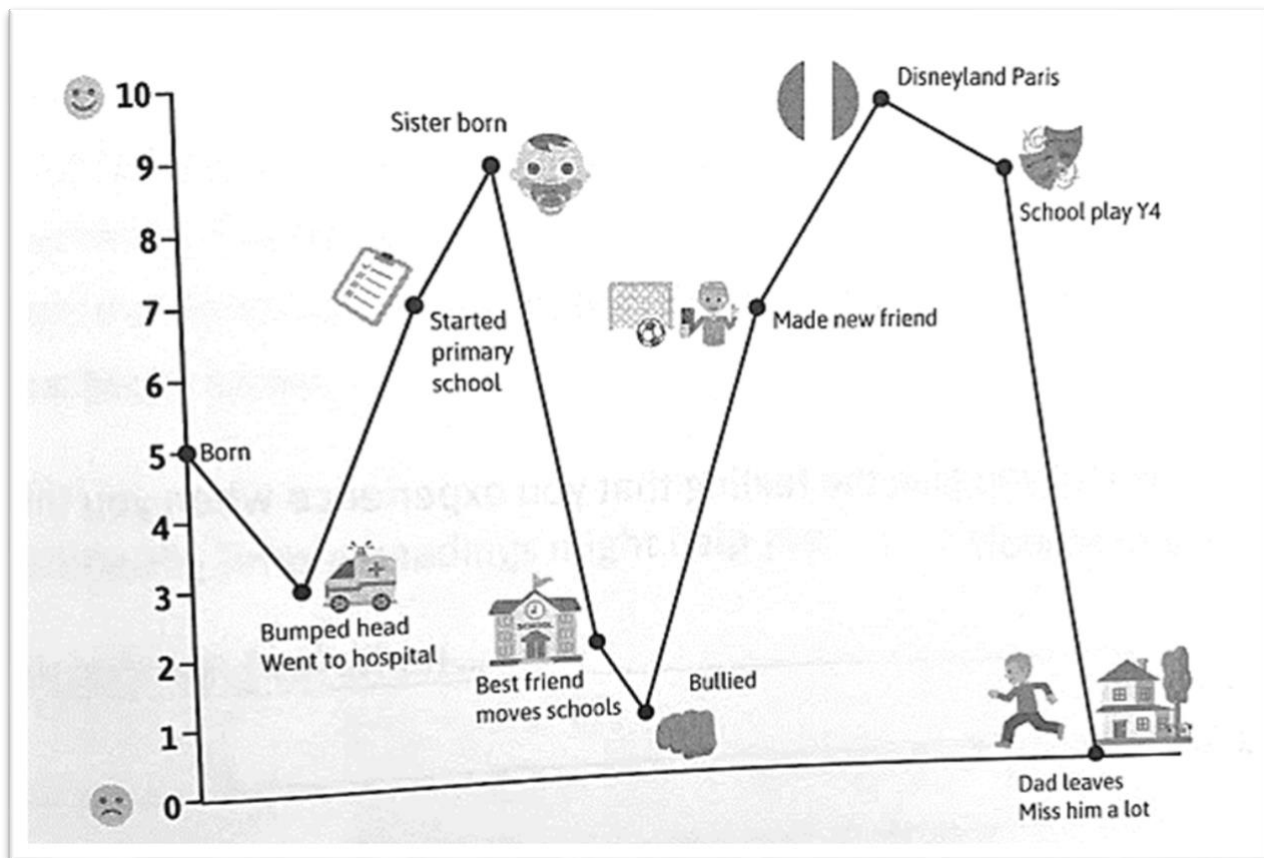
*Name all these important people and record how and why they are such a support.*

*Remember to thank them and also to keep them close.*



Appendix C – My Life Graph (Primary)

A life graph can help us to tell our 'story so far' and then think about what we want in the future.



Draw out your own,

Include all the highs and lows.

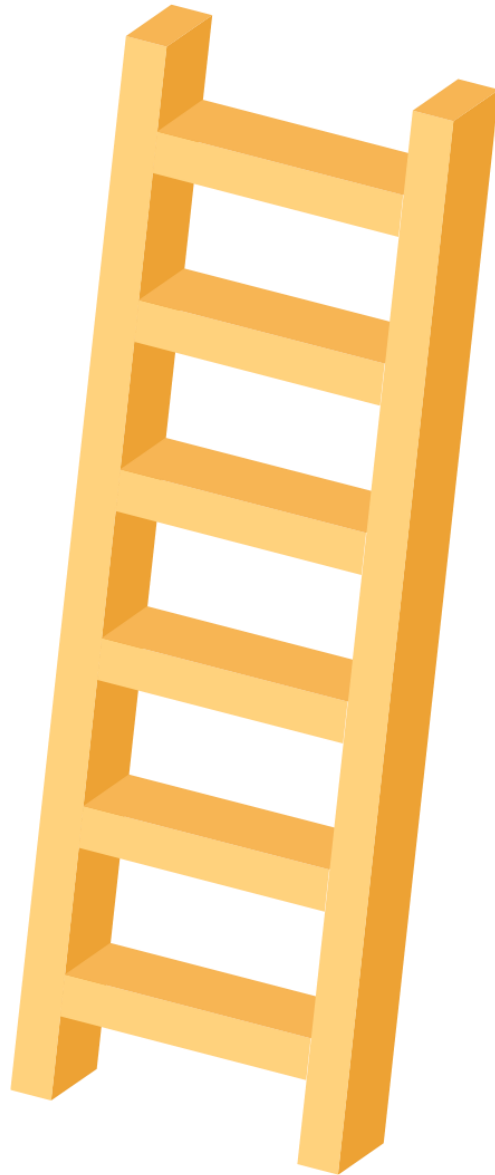
What were the happy moments?

What were the "not so good" moments?



## Appendix D – Worry Ladder (Primary)

*We can all help ourselves to manage fears and worries by making a ‘Worry Ladder’. Use the image of the ladder to write down all the gentle, easy steps you think you could take to face and conquer your fear. You can write each step on each rung. Begin at the easiest step at the bottom of the ladder. What could you do right now? What small step can you take? Then build up very, very slowly, noticing and celebrating every step of the way. What will happen is that you will see over time that it is okay to be with the feared objects or in the feared situation, like the classroom - that fears and worries are not there forever and that we can do something about them.*



## Appendix E – My Pupil Passport (Primary/Secondary)

*With the help of the person supporting you, design your own pupil passport.*

*1 Find a photo of yourself and stick it to the front of her folded a four piece of card.*

*2 Then record your name, your date of birth and the name of your class teacher on the front.*

*3 Next put down some information that you think might be helpful for your teacher to know.*

The following simple headings might help you:

### **I work and feel best when...**

1 \_\_\_\_\_

2 \_\_\_\_\_

3 \_\_\_\_\_

4 \_\_\_\_\_

5 \_\_\_\_\_

### **Things I find difficult...**

1 \_\_\_\_\_

2 \_\_\_\_\_

3 \_\_\_\_\_

4 \_\_\_\_\_

5 \_\_\_\_\_

### **Things you can do to help...**

1 \_\_\_\_\_

2 \_\_\_\_\_

3 \_\_\_\_\_

4 \_\_\_\_\_

5 \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix F – My Wellbeing Plan (Secondary)

*Making a plan for your wellbeing and setting realistic mental health goals is always a useful thing to do, but particularly so when you are at a transition point in your life. Start by thinking about the five key elements to emotional wellbeing:*



**Connect-** *This is to be social and to try to connect with someone each day. Call or meet up with someone who makes you feel good. Be active- 30 minutes of activity each day is said to keep your emotional wellbeing protected.*



**Keep Learning-** *Reflect each day on one thing that you learned that day it may be about any topic. Did you learn a key facts in history? Did you learn about the chemical reaction? Did you learn what is important to a friend? What do you know today that you did not know yesterday?*



**Give-** *This keeps happy hormones active in our minds and bodies try it think of ways you can give and who to. It may be giving your time to read with the younger sibling, giving help to an older person, or a gift to a friend.*



**Be Mindful-** *Being mindful is about enjoying the time here and now, not wishing you were somewhere else or thinking what is for dinner. We know that appreciating what we sense in the present moment encourages our bodies to work better.*

### First

*you can start by writing down one thing you have done today and one thing you plan to do tomorrow in each of the areas above will stop remember- we will not make changes and keep improving our mental health unless we set goals and make a well being plan.*

### Second

*Then think about setting specific goals for each of the five key elements to emotional wellbeing writes a goal for each of the five elements. Make sure that they are SMART!*

*SMART is an acronym that stands for:*



**Specific-** *very clear (e.g, I will keep active every day).*



**Measurable-** *I will time myself for 30 minutes every day doing my jogging around the park.*



**Achievable-** *I can do this as I have the time after school and my friend has agreed to do this with me it is not too hard to do.*



**Realistic and Relevant-** *It is relevant to keeping me in good mental health and I know that I can achieve it.*



**Time-limited-** *Set a date when you will review your progress in each of the five key elements*

*Finally, agree a date when you will review your progress with someone who is important to you and has your best interests at heart*

Appendix G – My Anxiety Playlist (Primary/Secondary)

*Music can help to calm and soothe us. Make up your own playlist. Use music as a calming strategy when you're feeling anxious. Try this over a week and see the difference it can make.*

**My List**

- 1 \_\_\_\_\_
- 2 \_\_\_\_\_
- 3 \_\_\_\_\_
- 4 \_\_\_\_\_
- 5 \_\_\_\_\_
- 6 \_\_\_\_\_
- 7 \_\_\_\_\_
- 8 \_\_\_\_\_
- 9 \_\_\_\_\_
- 10 \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix H– Letter to My Future Self (Secondary)

*Write a letter to your future self. Once your letter is written, you will put it away in a drawer cupboard for at least six months- a good place to pick is somewhere you will need to clear out when you move, but not for at least six months! Take paper and a pen and begin to think about what you want to say to yourself in six- or 12-months' time. Ask yourself:*

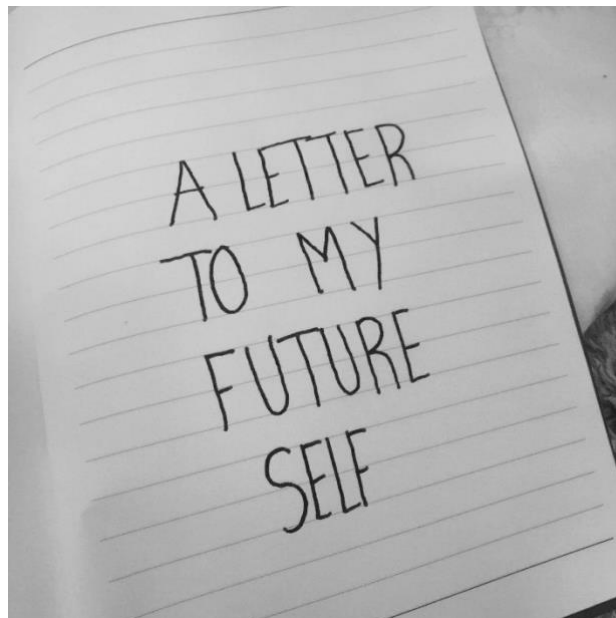
- *Who am I today?*
- *What are my goals? What are my dreams? What makes me happy? What makes me unhappy? What am I struggling with?*

*Then think about where you hope to be in six- or 12-months' time:*

- *Where will I be then?*
- *What will my hopes and goals be?*
- *What will I have achieved?*
- *Where will I have focused my efforts and energy?*
- *What or who will make me happy?*
- *What did I used to struggle with, but don't anymore?*

*Next write all the great things that you have in your life. Remind your future self about the things in your life that make you happy. You might write about your hobbies, your interests, your friends, your pets, your family your, your interests - whatever you feel is important. Write this down so that in six- or twelve-months' time you do not forget to reflect on the special things in your life now.*

*Now, hide the letter in a safe place.*



## Appendix I – Making an Anxiety Ladder (Secondary)

We can all help ourselves to manage fears and anxieties by making an anxiety ladder. This involves working out as many gentle steps as possible to build up an exposure to the feared thing, which might be returning to school or staying in a classroom. For example, if you're afraid of spiders, the bottom rung of the ladder might be hearing about a spider or looking at a picture of one.

Draw a ladder with ten or more rungs on it and then write down all the gentle, easy steps you could think you could take to face and conquer your fear. You can write each step on each rung. Begin at the bottom, easiest step on the ladder and build up very, very slowly, noticing and celebrating each step of the way.

What will happen is that you will build up good evidence over time that it is okay to be with the feared object from the feared situation like the classroom- **that fears are not there forever and that we can do something about them.**

## Appendix J – Time to Talk (Primary/Secondary)

Make a list of all the people you can talk to about your feelings:

- 1 \_\_\_\_\_
- 2 \_\_\_\_\_
- 3 \_\_\_\_\_
- 4 \_\_\_\_\_
- 5 \_\_\_\_\_

What makes those people special?

<b>Name</b>	
<i>They listen well</i>	
<i>They make me feel loved</i>	
<i>They are there when I need them</i>	
<i>They make me feel happy</i>	
<i>They make me feel calm</i>	
<i>Something else</i>	

What words might you use if you needed to talk to them about your feelings?

<b>Name</b>	
<i>I'm feeling worried</i>	
<i>I need to talk to you about something important</i>	
<i>I need your help</i>	
<i>I feel sad</i>	
<i>Something else</i>	

How do you feel when you've talked to someone about how you feel?

Happy? Calm? Relieved? Sad? Worried? Loved?

## Appendix K – Challenging my Negative Automatic Thoughts (NATs) (Secondary)

- *We all have negative thoughts.*
- *We listen to our thoughts a lot.*
- *We often accept negative thoughts as the truth without really challenging them.*
- *These thoughts can become loud and it becomes harder to hear the positive thoughts.*
- *The more we listen to them, the more uncomfortable and down we feel in the less we do- it's a TRAP!*

*Identify an NAT that you experience and then ask:*

- *What is the evidence for this thought?*
- *What is the evidence against this thought?*
- *What would my best friend say if I if they heard my thought?*
- *What would my teacher say if they heard my thought?*
- *What would my parents or carers say if they heard my thought?*
- *What would I say to my best friend if they had this same thought?*
- *Am I making mistakes? For example, blowing it up and forgetting my strengths or good points, self-blaming or predicting failure, or thinking that I can mind-read what others are thinking?*

## References

### Main Sources:

EBSA Horizons, Educational Psychologist CPD on Emotionally Based School Avoidance, by specialist EP, Dr. Jerricah Holder.

Kirklees Educational Psychology Service (2021) Advice and guidance for schools Emotionally Based School Avoidance.

Lancashire Educational Psychology Service (2020) Emotionally Based School Avoidance Guidance.

Rae, T., 2020. *Understanding & supporting children & young people with Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA)*. United Kingdom: Hinton House.

Sheffield Educational Psychology Service (2020) Emotionally Based School Avoidance Guidance for professionals working with families and young people.

Staffordshire Educational Psychology Service (2020) Emotionally Based School Avoidance: Guidance for Educational Settings.

West Sussex Educational Psychology Service (2018) Emotionally Based School Avoidance: Good practice guide for schools and support agencies.

### Secondary Sources:

Baker, M. and Bishop, F. L. (2015). Out of school: a phenomenological exploration of extended non-attendance. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 31 (4), 354-368.

Egger, H., Costello, J., & Angold, A. (2003). School Refusal and Psychiatric Disorders: A Community Study. *Journal Of The American Academy Of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 42(7), 797-807.

<https://doi.org/10.1097/01.chi.0000046865.56865.79>

Ek, H., & Eriksson, R. (2013). Psychological Factors Behind Truancy, School Phobia, and School Refusal: A Literature Study. *Child & Family Behavior Therapy*, 35(3), 228-248.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/07317107.2013.818899>

Elliott, J. (1999). Practitioner Review: School Refusal: Issues of Conceptualisation, Assessment, and Treatment. *Journal Of Child Psychology And Psychiatry*, 40(7), 1001-1012. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-7610.00519>

Finning, K., Ukoumunne, O., Ford, T., Danielson-Waters, E., Shaw, L., & Romero De Jager, I. et al. (2019). Review: The association between anxiety and poor attendance at school - a systematic review. *Child And Adolescent Mental Health*, 24(3), 205-216. <https://doi.org/10.1111/camh.12322>

Gulliford, A. & Miller, A. (2015). Coping with life by coping with school? School refusal in young people. *Educational Psychology*. Ed. Cline, T., Gulliford, A. & Birch, S. Routledge. Hove, UK.

Heyne, D., Melvin, G., Gren-Landell, M., & Gentle-Genitty, C. (2018). Differentiation Between School Attendance Problems: Why and How? *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cbpra.2018.03.006>

Inglés, C., González-Maciá, C., García-Fernández, J., Vicent, M., & Martínez-Monteagudo, M. (2015). Current status of research on school refusal. *European Journal Of Education And Psychology*, 8(1), 37-52.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejeps.2015.10.005>

- Katz, F., Leith, E., & Paliokosta, E. (2016). Fifteen-minute consultation for a child not attending school: A Structured approach to school refusal. *Archives of Disease in Childhood: Education and Practice Edition*, 101(1), 21–25. <https://doi.org/10.1136/archdischild-2013-304055>
- Kearney, C.A. (2008). School absenteeism and school refusal behaviour in youth: A contemporary review. *Clinical psychology review*, 28(3), 451–471
- Kearney, C., & Bensaheb, A. (2006). School Absenteeism and School Refusal Behavior: A Review and Suggestions for School-Based Health Professionals. *Journal Of School Health*, 76(1), 3-7. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1746-1561.2006.00060.x>
- Kearney, C., & Silverman, W. (1990). A Preliminary Analysis of a Functional Model of Assessment and Treatment for School Refusal Behavior. *Behavior Modification*, 14(3), 340-366. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01454455900143007>
- King, N. and Bernstein, G. (2001). School Refusal in Children and Adolescents: A Review of the Past 10 Years. *Journal of American Academy of Child Adolescent Psychiatry*, 40(2), 197–205.
- Nuttall, C., & Woods, K. (2013). Effective intervention for school refusal behaviour. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 29, 347–366.
- O'Hagan, S., Bond, C., & Hebron, J. (2022). Autistic girls and emotionally based school avoidance: supportive factors for successful re-engagement in mainstream high school. *International Journal Of Inclusive Education*, 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2022.2049378>
- Pellegrini, D. (2007). School Non-attendance: Definitions, meanings, responses, interventions. *Educational Psychology In Practice*, 23(1), 63-77. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02667360601154691>
- Thambirajah, M. S., Grandison, K.J. and De-Hayes, L. (2008). *Understanding school refusal: A handbook for professionals in education, health and social care*. London: Jessica Kingsley.
- The Autism Research Institute*. Autism Research Institute. (2022). Retrieved 13 May 2022, from <https://www.autism.org/>.