

EBSA Strategies and Tool Kit for Families

This summary document 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 the UK. We would like to acknowledge Sheffield EPS, Staffordshire EPS, Lancashire EPS, West Sussex EPS and Kirklees EPS. A more comprehensive guidance and references can be found in our centralised document titled “EBSA Guidance and Tool Kits”.

Aim/Purpose

The purpose of this summary document is to provide educational settings with evidence-based strategies and a tool kit that supports children and young people (CYP) with Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) needs.

A key objective of the summary document is to facilitate families in with supporting their child with 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 document 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.”**

Signs of EBSA

Your child may present with the following signs:

- Crying
- Pleading
- Fearfulness
- Anxiety
- Outbursts
- Expression of negative feelings
- Complaints of anxiety symptoms including, racing heart, shaking, sweating, difficulty breathing etc.
- 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.



Normalising Anxiety

“**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.”

Worrying or anxious feelings are normal feelings that we all experience. These feelings are evolutionary; they can keep us safe from harm or even help us perform in difficult situations. 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, some excessive worrying can become an issue especially when it stops young people doing what they want or need to do. From some young people, this may lead to difficulties to attending school.

If your child experiences high levels of anxiety and does not want to attend school, they may be specifically experiencing Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA).

What can you do as a parent/carer to support your child/young person?

One of the most important ways you can support your child/young person experiencing EBSA is by **actively listening** to them as well as **acknowledging and validating** any fears and worries they may have. You can reassure them that you and the school will work together to make school a happier place for them.

5 tips for families when speaking to their child with EBSA



Taking a minute for coregulation will help you both feel calm: to put you in a better place to find answers to their questions



Be Curious

It's okay to explore deeper to develop understanding. This can help you find ways to problem solve together

Time to Talk

Setting aside time to check in and talk about feelings can reduce worries building up.



Facts not Fiction

Being open and honest will reduce your child needing to fill in the gaps with their own assumptions and catastrophising

Aim to accept your child's questions, feelings or thoughts. **Validate** how they feel to show that you have heard them.



Strategies for Self-Regulating your Child/Young Person

MINDFULNESS

Practicing mindful activities have been shown to help us feel calmer, find focus, accept kindness and to let go of worry.



PHYSICAL HEALTH

Being active eating a nutritious diet and getting good sleep helps us to have more energy and feel more in control to manage big feelings.



BREATHING

Controlling our breath can have a positive impact on how the rest of our body feels.



GROUNDING

Take five minutes in the day to notice: What we can see, hear, smell, touch and taste.

ENVIRONMENT

Spend time outside every day. Use the grounding techniques to connect ourselves with nature.

Support Plan

As soon as issues around EBSA start to arise, inform the school that there is a problem so that you can start working in partnership with them to address the issue. School should create a plan to help your child with a clear and consistent approach. They should include your voice and the child's voice at the centre of their plan.

There will likely be difficulties implementing the plan and these should be anticipated, and solutions found. It is possible that at the beginning your child may show more unhappiness and you should prepare yourself for this possibility. It's important that the adults show a positive 'united front' and if you do have any concerns you should talk about this with the school staff involved. Try to keep optimistic and not to worry when difficulties arise. It's important to remember that 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.

Families' expectations for schools:

Listen and acknowledge the challenges faced by your child and you as their parent.

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. Find ways of making school a happier place and improve their attendance

Respond to any school-based needs i.e. academic issues, social relationships, addressing bullying issues etc.

Consider the **support when your child arrives at school**. I.e. meeting a friend at a specific place and time, using a quiet space to settle before school starts etc.

If difficulties persist the school should consider requesting **involvement from other professionals**.

A Person-Centred Plan

Start with your young person's views when making any plan. Keep these at the centre, then bring in family views, school staff and any agencies involved.

A Gentle Approach-Gradual and Supported

Carefully consider the pace of the planned return to school, with emphasis on how rather than when. Celebrate and consolidate each small step before expecting more.

Be Aware of Triggers

Talk to your young person about who they feel are their safe people, places, ways of communicating and times of their day.

Sunday/Monday Plans

Mondays are often hard: Think about a positive routine that can start on Sunday evening. Maybe plan something for them to look forward to too.

Welcome

Planning and knowing what to expect and who will be there when your young person arrives at school can create a "soft landing"



Families Concerns and Worries: Capturing your Child/Young Person's EBSA Needs

When attending a meeting/ helping with the plan to support your child/young person, it can be helpful to record your concerns in one place:



SCHOOL



HOME AND FAMILY

FRIENDSHIPS

HEALTH



SOMETHING ELSE



Strategy for Sunday/Morning Plans

Dr Tina Rae's Sunday evening and Morning Plans suggestions:

Sunday Evening Plan

Soothe – Do some calming activities and make the last things at night soothing – gentle music, story for children, soft lighting, talk about 3 good things before bed etc.

Understand – Make sure you let them know you do understand their feelings and you do not negate or dismiss them – you understand how hard it is but it will get back in time! Develop your script for this if appropriate.

Neutralise – Record any worries in a worry book and then talk through each one helping the child to see a solution/where they are catastrophising and show them the evidence against any irrational thoughts/thinking patterns.

Decide – Decide on a plan of action and go through it step by step – this is what we will do tomorrow. Work out the schedule and ensure everything is ready – book bag, PE kit etc. and laid out for the next morning. Make the plan visual if needed.

Attend – Be vigilant to your child's emotional state and give more time if they need it so they that feel nurtured and safe. Give reassurance and a [transitional object for younger children](#).

Yourself – Look after yourself and make sure that you are regulated and feel calm yourself. Engage in some relaxation and take time out after the bedtime routine for you to build up your own resources and remember that it is ok to feel worried but don't let it overwhelm you.



Monday Morning Plan

Manage – Manage yourself FIRST! This is not selfish. You cannot support a child or young person who is unregulated and stressed if you are too. Take time to sort out your own needs and then manage your emotional state by using your usual stress management tools e.g. grounding/time alone/mindfulness.

Organise – Get everything ready (by getting up earlier) so the bags are in the hallway, the breakfast is set up and your own things for work (whatever you need to be organised). This means that you can attend to the child and do so in a regulated manner.

Neutralise – Spend some time with your child talking through worries and again helping them to see a solution where they are catastrophising and show them the evidence against any irrational thoughts and thinking patterns.

Decide – This is the plan – make it clear to them that you have a plan to get to school, how you will get there, what music you might listen to in the car, stories you might tell each other on the bus/as you walk, who else might be with you etc. This is for it to become clear and so they feel prepare for each step.

Accept – Accept the child's emotional state and give them reassurance that you love and care for them so they feel nurtured and safe. Give reassurance and a transitional object for young children. You can say to your child: It's ok to feel anxious but we all need to manage it and I will help you. I am with you and will stay with you while you need me.

Yourself – Look after yourself and make sure that you are regulated and feel calm yourself. Engage in some relaxation and remember that it is ok to feel worried but don't let it overwhelm you. Keep using the script – If I stay calm, I will make him/her feel safe.



Tool Kit

Transitional object (Primary age)

A transitional object is something that can be used to remind your child that you continue to think about them and are connected to them even though you are apart.

Examples of transitional objects include: a bracelet; a photo of you; a note in your child's lunchbox; a cuddly toy or other comforter; or a small item of clothing belonging to you. Equally, it could be something intangible, like a kiss (or something else) or perfume sprayed on your child's shirt. You and your child could also take the same thing to school and to work to show that you are thinking about each other (e.g. a special button sewn inside a jumper).

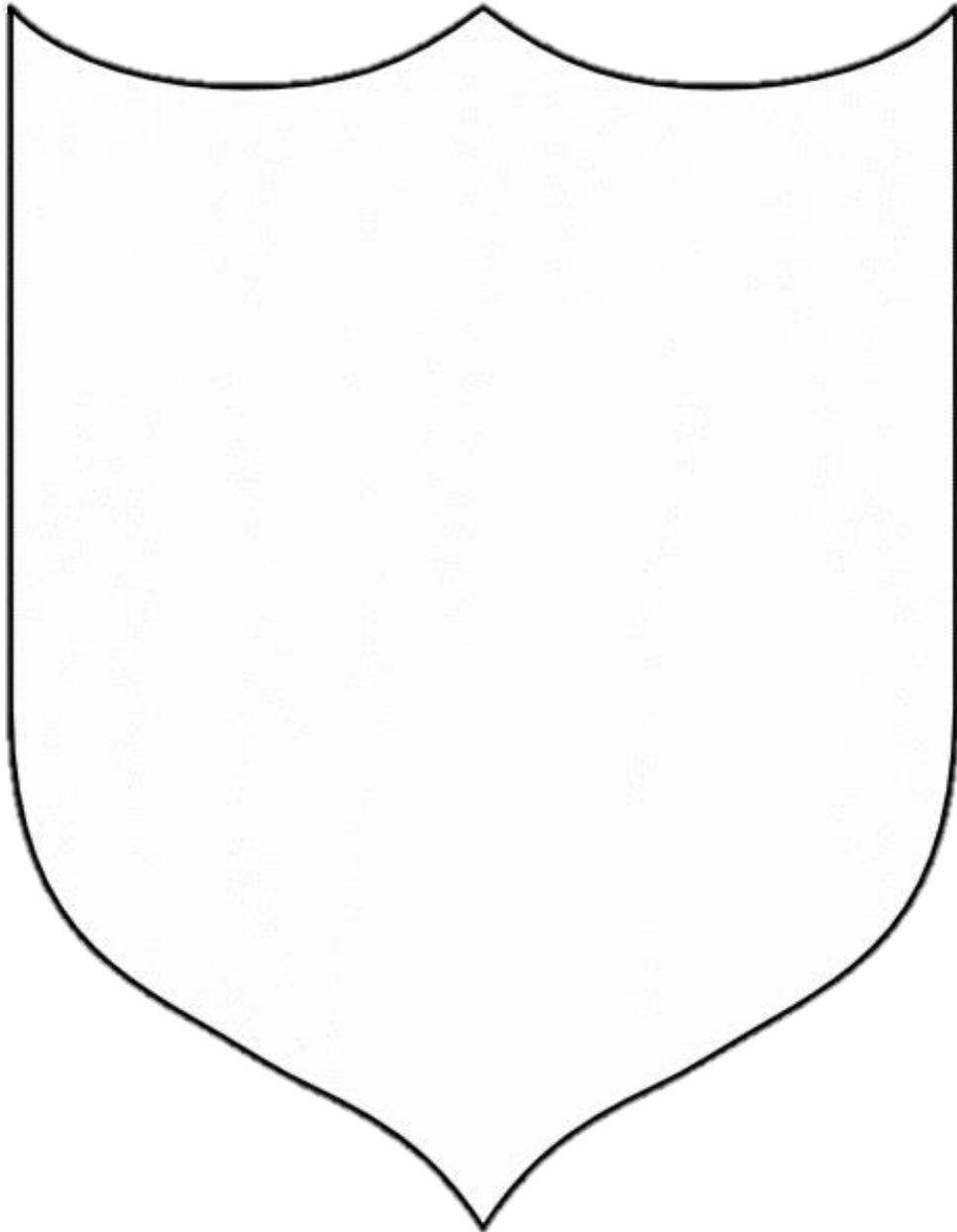




My Happiness Shield (Primary age)

Use the shield on this page to record all the things, people, thoughts, feelings and behaviours that you have that can protect you against stress and the things that make you feel sad or bad.

When you feel stressed, sad or bad, take out your shield and visualise it giving you protection.



Make a Calm Box (Primary age)

When you are feeling very emotional, having some quiet time with some calming activities or objects can help. Try to choose activities that you are confident you can achieve – this will relax you and boost your confidence even more.

Try making a personalised “calm box” for times when you are experiencing big emotions. This is a box you can fill with objects and activities that soothe and help you feel more confident/

Make it together with your trusted adult, as this will help you gain feelings of control and predictability, which can be calming.

Things that you might put in your calm box:

- *A mindful colouring book*
- *Felt-tip pens*
- *A snow-globe*
- *A cuddly toy*
- *Lavender-scented playdough*





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 _____

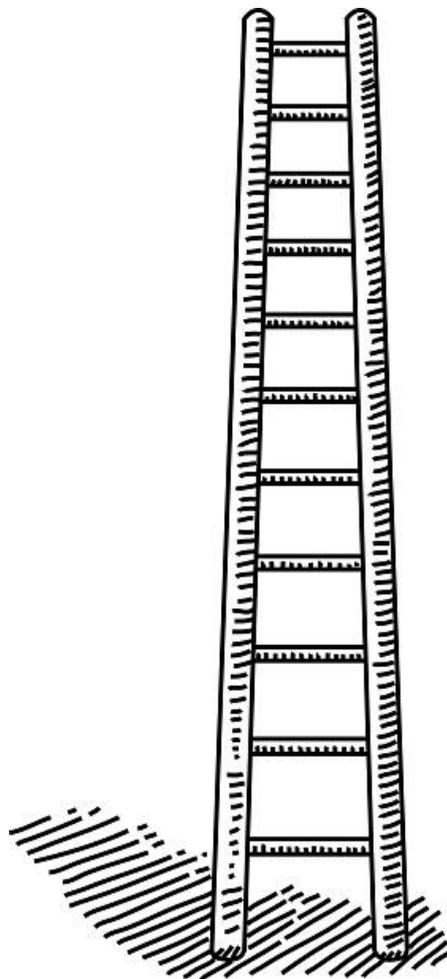


Making an Anxiety Ladder (Secondary)

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.**



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

Fidget Spinner (Secondary)

Fidget spinners potentially can be used to relieve stress and distract us from rumination about things that we find stressful. They have capacity to be good objects of focus for mindfulness meditations and has been found to be beneficial for young people with ADHD and ASD.

