

Information for parents and carers - Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA)

Worry and anxiety is a feeling that most of us experience from time to time, some more than others due to environmental or genetic factors. It can be useful to feel this way sometimes, to keep us safe from harm or to push us to perform better in difficult situations. However, anxiety or worrying too much can become a problem and can take over especially when it prevents people from doing what they really want or need to do.

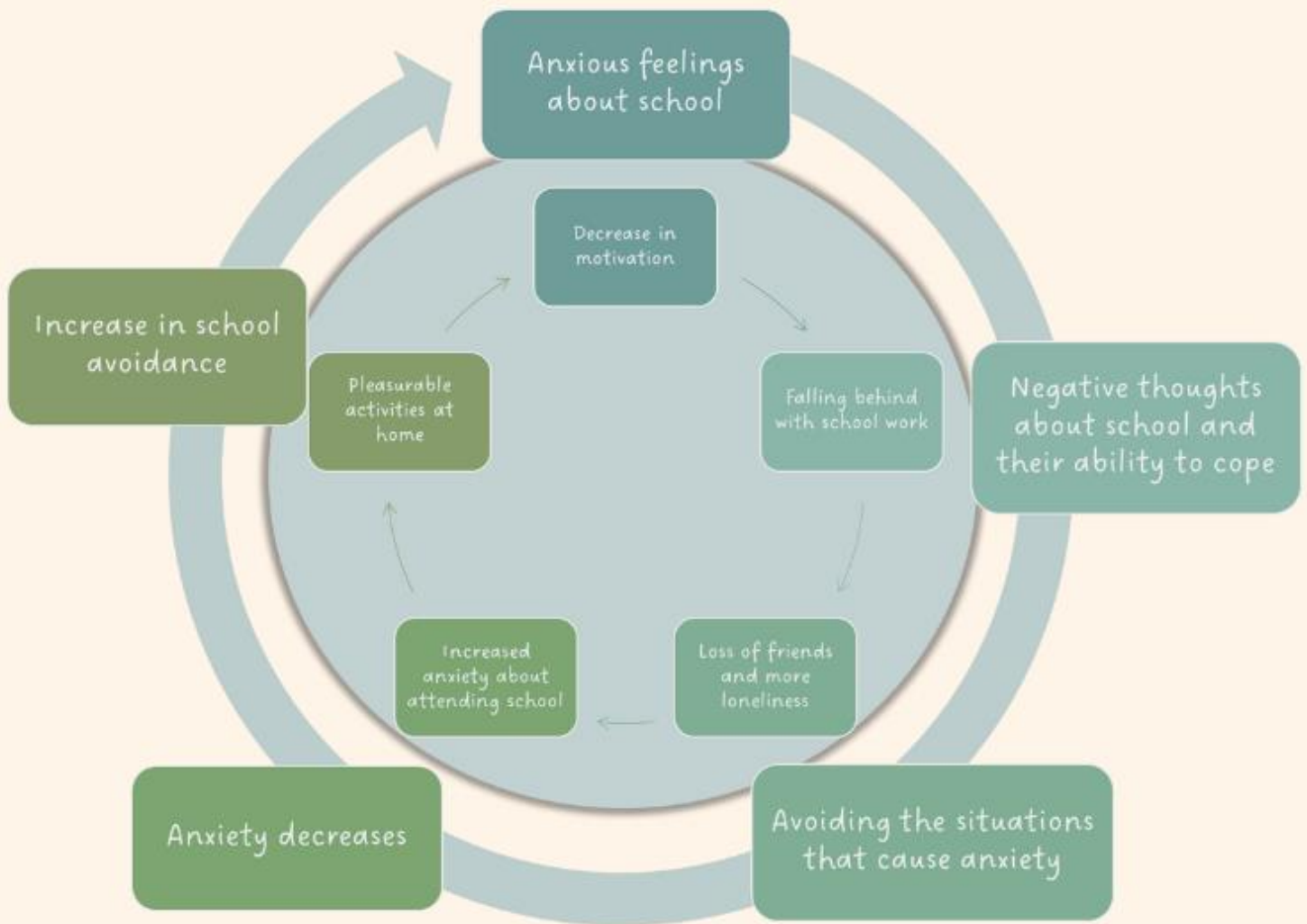
What is EBSA?

EBSA is a term used to describe a group of children and young people who have difficulty attending school due to emotional factors (such as anxiety), which often lead to extended absences from school. The acronym EBSA stands for Emotionally Based School Avoidance.

When anxiety is linked to school absence, the young person can experience anxious thoughts about attending school and their ability to cope with school. Physical symptoms of anxiety may also be present e.g. sweating, shaking, stomach ache, nausea, headache etc. starting the night before or even a few days before they are expected to attend school.

In an attempt to avoid experiencing such feelings, thoughts and physical symptoms, many people's coping method is to withdraw from the situation by any means possible e.g. refusing to leave the house, refusing to attend school, using challenging behavior to avoid the situation that feels threatening. The result of avoiding attending school is that the feelings of anxiety are reduced short-term. Because of this the avoidance behavior is "rewarded" and reinforced over time, while at the same time the young person's negative thoughts about their ability (or inability) to cope with the school environment are reinforced. This creates a vicious cycle that leads to the continuation of EBSA.

The longer the problems remain unsolved, the more difficult it becomes to change school avoidance behaviour.



Signs of EBSA

Signs may include:

- Anxiety, fear, emotional 'outbursts' of negative feelings when faced with the prospect of attending school.
- A pattern of complaining that they feel ill; stomach ache, headache, sore throat.
- Symptoms of anxiety such as rapid heartbeat, sweating, breathing difficulties, nausea, 'pins and needles'

The symptoms are usually worse in the mornings during the week and decrease at weekends and school holidays.

Push/Pull Factors

There are many factors associated with Emotionally Based School Avoidance. We can refer to them as 'push and pull' factors. Push factors increase a child or young person's ability to attend school, and pull factors are those that reduce them (and therefore make it more likely that the child or young person will stay at home). See the table below for examples.

Environmental

Push factors - towards school

- Parental pressure to go to school
- Parents work so more difficult to stay at home
- Peers attending the school
- Good social networks
- Good habits, sleep etc

Pull factors - away from school

- Parental illness
- Like the security/flexibility of the routine at home
- Likes toys at home
- Less noise and distractions

School

Push factors - towards school

- A positive transition to school
- Good relationship with teachers and peers
- Needs identified and met
- A sense of belonging

Pull factors - away from school

- Unmet needs - learning, social, emotional, sensory
- Bullying
- Friendship difficulties
- Unrealistic expectations and study/exam pressure
- Dislikes the competitive element of school
- Relationship breaks down with the teacher/s
- Dislike some lessons e.g. Mathematics

Individual

Push factors - towards school

- Good awareness of feelings and how to calm themselves when starting to feel anxious
- Good awareness of thoughts and how to interpret them e.g. is it based on fact?
- Motivated to attend school in order to succeed in the future.

Pull factors - away from school

- Immature emotional regulation skills
- Negative thought patterns
- Not motivated to go to school - Does not see it as important
- Health concerns
- Sensory challenges
- Previous bad experiences of school

What should you do?

The first step to supporting your child is to listen to them and recognize that their feelings are valid. Try to remind them of the importance of attending school and reassure them that you can work in partnership with the school to make it a more comfortable place for them.

Contact the school to let them know there is a problem as soon as possible. Then work together with designated staff members to gather information in order to create a full picture of the situation and draw up a joint plan with your child to help them. It is to be expected that your child may find initiating a plan quite challenging and may feel uncomfortable or unhappy during the first steps, or during specific periods e.g. after school holidays, and you will need to prepare yourself for this. Try to be as positive as possible with your child - by continuing to listen and work together it will be possible to move forward.

It is very important that your child and all adults involved in the situation at home and school work together and agree on a course of action and have opportunities to review regularly.



It may be tempting to think of moving school, however try to persevere and try to solve the issue in the current school. Research suggests that difficulties would often reappear in the new school.

It is terribly difficult for you as parents to see your child unhappy to the extent that attending school is a daily challenge. Make sure you also have someone to talk to. This could be a friend, family member or organization (see information below).

Finally, it is very important that your child has someone to talk to at all times. This could be a family member, a friend of someone at school or an organisation.

What can the school do?

- Identify a key member of staff to lead on your child's support. It is important that you are aware of who the key member of staff is as well and how to contact them.
- Gather as much information as is relevant from yourself, your child, and all the staff to get a full picture and understanding of the situation.
- Work together with you and your child to draw up a support plan based on the information gathered. The plan should include some short-term goals and how you will, in partnership with the school, support your child to reach these goals.
- The plan should be reviewed and adjusted regularly noting a specific timeline.
- Celebrate the progress being made and make adjustments to the plan if necessary.
- If difficulties persist over time the school should consider asking the advice of other professionals.



General strategies on how you can help your child at home

1. Talk to your child about their concerns

It is likely that your child will be anxious to talk to you about returning to school. If they find it difficult to talk, there are some specific questions you can ask to help them understand and acknowledge the way they feel, while also remembering to remind them and highlight the positive things.

Example:

What three things do you like about school?

What three things are you most worried about?

Your child may find it difficult to talk face to face. Ask if they would prefer to write, email or text, or take a picture to show you how they feel.

Comfort and be there for them, explain that you understand that this is difficult for them but that you will help them through it. Give them your full attention, maintain eye contact (if they are comfortable with that) and most importantly, listen to them.

2. Develop a routine for evenings and mornings before school.

If your child attends school, it is useful to have a calming routine in the evening and in the morning. Preparing as much as possible the night before will allow the morning to run more smoothly and calmly, and limit the opportunities to pause and gather thoughts.

Establish what a successful day would look like and decide with your child what needs to happen the night before to make this happen. Go through their schedule step by step and make sure everything is ready e.g. Books, a bag, sports clothes and put them out. Make the procedure visual if necessary e.g. visual schedule.

If your child is absent, try to stick to a normal waking and sleeping routine to facilitate the transition back to school. If the school shares work, encourage your child to undertake these activities during school hours with your support.

3. Listen to your child and acknowledge their feelings

Children are more likely to talk to their parents or carers about their concerns than anyone else. What you should consider when talking to your child about their concerns:

- Show that you are listening attentively by considering your body language, facial expression, eye contact and not interrupting.
- Try not to get upset during the discussion.
- Acknowledge that your child's fears are real and empathize with how they feel. For example; "I can tell you feel very anxious about going back to school on Monday. I'm sorry, that must be very difficult for you".

Things you should not do when talking to your child about their concerns;

- Telling them they shouldn't feel worried, that would make them feel like their feelings aren't valid.
- Let them talk endlessly about their concerns in detail. This can inadvertently give them more attention for being anxious than anything else.
- Argue about the concern.

It may be sufficient to sit with your child and listen. You don't have to 'fix' the problem for your child on the spot. Some children may not say openly that they feel anxious about school, but they may show it in their behaviour. If so, it might be helpful for you to start a conversation with them, for example:

"I notice you are upset. I wonder if this is because you are thinking about going to school tomorrow? Can you tell me more?"

Children look to their parents/carers to see how they react to situations and they are very good at reading the body language of their parents/carers. If you look worried, your child will interpret this as a sign or confirmation that they should be worried, and that the situation is unsafe. By remaining positive you give the impression that you believe the situation can change.

4. Reduce attention for anxious behaviours

Children are motivated by the attention of adults that are important to them, be that positive or negative attention. There needs to be a balance between attending to a child's concerns and helping them manage their worries. Parents/carers should make sure that they do not inadvertently pay more attention to anxious behaviors (e.g. by giving reassurance, hugging) than to times when their child is trying to be more confident/successful. When your child is anxious acknowledge the anxious feelings, and encourage your child to use their coping strategies. It is equally important to recognize your child's everyday successes and draw attention to the skills they have used to succeed.

5. Give frequent and specific praise.

It is important that your child feels that their efforts are recognised. E.g. "wow, I'm so proud of you for wearing your school uniform today without fuss", "You did a great job using your calming strategies", "I could see you were feeling anxious but you got on the bus and you said it wasn't as bad as you thought".

6. Be aware that avoiding situations that cause anxiety can reinforce the behaviour

Sometimes it can be easier for parents to allow their child to avoid things that cause them stress, even when these things are actually safe. For example, writing a letter saying that your child is sick on the day of a test that your child is worried about. This gives the child the message that the uncomfortable feelings are too difficult for them to cope with and that it is better to avoid such situations. This can increase the child's anxiety. Instead, you can tell your child that you are proud of them for having the courage to attend school and try the test, as you know they are worried. This will require you to be firm but supportive.

7. Be positive about the school

Encourage your child to focus their attention on the positive aspects of school (e.g. friends, favorite lessons/teacher, activities they enjoys doing) rather than the negative things (i.e. why they finds it difficult to attend).

Continue to communicate the hope that the world of education will eventually become part of your child's daily routine.

Further Sources of Support

Team Around the Family

If you need help to resolve concerns, team around the family can help you create a plan and pull together agencies to support you. If you want to discuss the support of Team Around the Family, contact the Gwynedd Children's Referral Team:

Tel: 01758 704 455

E-mail: cyfeiriadauplant@gwynedd.llyw.cymru



Teulu Môn

A free and inclusive service for families on Anglesey. It is the first point of contact for all children, families and professionals for information, advice and assistance relating to children or the families of children, aged 0 to 25 years. They are part of Children's Services and they could inform about activities for children and/or local support groups in the area, can help if your child is experiencing problems at school, or discuss concerns you have about the child's well-being.

Phone: 01248 725 888 (ask for Teulu Môn)

Facebook: The Anglesey Family | Facebook



Rhwyd Arall

Rhwyd Arall is a project responding to the needs of young people of secondary age who have been de-registered from secondary education. The project uses the Sustainable Livelihoods Method to maintain or restart the education of young people with the Local Education Authorities of Gwynedd and Anglesey.

Tel: 01286 677117

Website: <http://www.sylfaencymunedol.org/>



Anna Freud – National Centre for Children and Families

A free network for professional education workers/parents who share practical, academic and clinical expertise about mental health and wellbeing in schools and colleges. Resources such as '7 ways to support children and young people who are worried' and 'advice for parents and carers: talking about mental health with young people in secondary school'.

Website: www.annafreud.org



Welsh Government Website: Parenting. Give it Time.

Practical tips and free expert advice, for all your parenting challenges as well as advice to help you with the day to day challenges of being a parent.

Website: Parenting. Give it time. | GOV. WALES



Youngminds

A charity that promotes the wellbeing and mental health of young people. They have lots of information for parents, as well as a helpline.

Telephone number: [0808 802 5544](tel:08088025544)

Website: <https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents>

YOUNGmINDS

SNAP Cymru

Providing information, advice and support to parents, children and young people with additional learning needs or disabilities.

Website: <https://www.snapcymru.org/>



Square Peg and 'Not fine in school'

Square Peg is an organization founded in 2019 by parents with personal experience, to encourage systemic change for children and young people who experience difficulty attending school, and their families. They have partnered with 'Not Fine in School' which is an organization led by parents/carers of children who have trouble attending school. They have a website and Facebook group that offers support and the opportunity to communicate with people who have faced similar experiences.

Website: www.teamsquarepeg.org and www.notfineinschool.co.uk

