A Family Services Guide

Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA)

Understanding anxiety-driven difficulties attending school

Supporting autistic children, young people, adults and their families across Barking and Dagenham, Havering and Redbridge

Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA)

Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) describes a child or young person experiencing significant difficulty attending school because of overwhelming emotional factors, most often anxiety.

It can lead to prolonged or patterned absence, and it affects an estimated 1–5% of the school population, though the true number – including those who attend but avoid parts of the school day – is not fully known.

EBSA is not the same as truancy

A key distinction

Truancy typically involves a child choosing to miss school, often without a parent/carer's knowledge, and is not usually driven by anxiety.

- **EBSA is driven by genuine emotional distress –** fear, panic, or overwhelming anxiety – and the young person often wants to attend but feels unable to.
- The older term "school refusal" is increasingly avoided, as "refusal" implies a choice, when in reality the young person's emotional state is preventing attendance.

> **A word of caution**
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> Treating EBSA with punitive attendance measures (sanctions, threats, forced attendance) does not address the underlying anxiety and can make things worse.

Signs of EBSA

Physical symptoms before school

Stomach aches, headaches, nausea, or feeling faint, which often ease once the pressure to attend has passed.

Difficulty leaving

Difficulty getting ready, leaving the house, or getting out of the car at school.

Crying, panic, anger, or shutting down

At the prospect of attending school.

Low or intermittent attendance

Or attending but avoiding certain lessons, spaces, or times of day.

Social withdrawal

Or difficulty forming relationships with peers and staff.

Persistent worry

About specific aspects of school – academic performance, particular lessons, unstructured times, or interactions with certain people.

Why EBSA happens – push and pull factors

There is rarely a single cause. EBSA is usually best understood through a combination of "push" factors (things that make school itself feel difficult) and "pull" factors (things that make staying at home feel safer or more appealing).

EBSA becomes more likely when the risks and stresses a young person is carrying outweigh their coping resources and support.

School-related (push)

Difficult transitions (e.g. primary to secondary), bullying or peer difficulties, academic pressure, sensory overload, unstructured or unpredictable times such as lunch and corridors.

Family and home factors (pull)

Family stress, bereavement, illness, caring responsibilities, or a home environment that unintentionally feels safer or more accommodating than school.

Individual factors

Anxiety or other mental health difficulties, unidentified or unsupported autism, ADHD, or other learning differences, low self-confidence, or a previous traumatic event.

The four functions of school avoidance

Research by Kearney and colleagues identifies four common underlying functions that avoidance can serve for a young person. Understanding which function (or combination) applies to an individual helps shape the right support, rather than treating all EBSA the same way.

Avoid specific things at school

That provoke anxiety or distress (e.g. noise, crowds, certain lessons).

Escape uncomfortable situations

Uncomfortable social or evaluative situations (e.g. speaking in class, being watched, socialising).

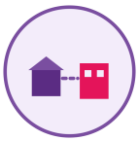
Gain attention

From parents/carers or other significant people.

Access something more rewarding

More enjoyable or rewarding activities or comfort outside of school.

How to support a young person with EBSA



Work collaboratively

Between home and school to understand the specific triggers behind the avoidance.

A graduated, individualised return

Rather than expecting an immediate full return – this might include a reduced timetable, alternative entry point or space, or extra transition support.

Keep pathways to school open

Even during absence – maintaining a relationship with a trusted adult at school can prevent the gap from widening.

Involve relevant professionals early

Educational psychology, SENCOs, pastoral staff, and where appropriate, mental health or autism-specific support.

Avoid framing the young person negatively

Avoid "naughty", "manipulative", or "just anxious about nothing" – the distress is real, even where the trigger is not immediately obvious.

Respond with patience and understanding rather than pressure, blame, or punishment.

Remember

The longer a child or young person remains out of school, the harder the eventual return can become, as the pattern of avoidance is reinforced over time. Early, sensitive, and collaborative intervention – addressing the underlying cause rather than the attendance figures alone – gives the best chance of a positive outcome.