

Emotionally-based School Avoidance

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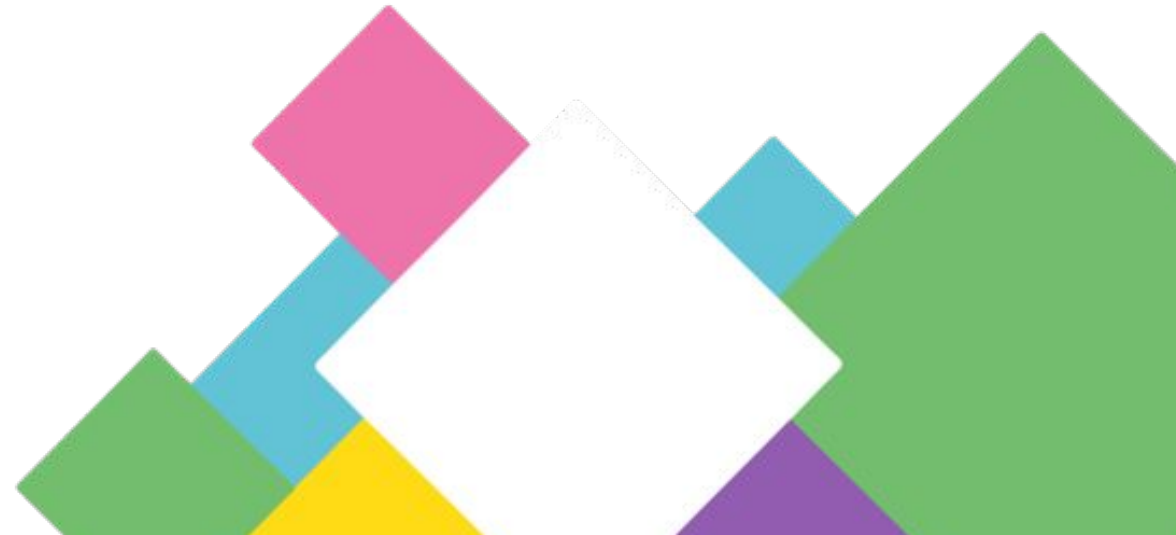
Head of Clinical Help

Anna Freud

Some background for discussion.

CYP Scrutiny Commission

Hackney 11th March 2024



Acknowledgement of the complexities of EBSA

It's important to acknowledge the varied lived experiences of EBSA across children, families and schools. The term EBSA is working terminology and there is no single causal factor.

Work with families involves strategies and approaches around supporting children & young people who may be showing emerging signs of EBSA. We know that early intervention is paramount.

However, we want to acknowledge that long-term EBSA can lead to difficulties between home and school, and this can be challenging for all involved, with the child or young person continuing to struggle and feel isolated.



What is EBSA?

Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) describes the behaviours of a group of children and young people.

These children and young people have difficulty attending school due to emotional factors, which can result in prolonged absences from school.

It is not a mental health diagnosis, but rather a description of exhibited behaviours from a range of factors.

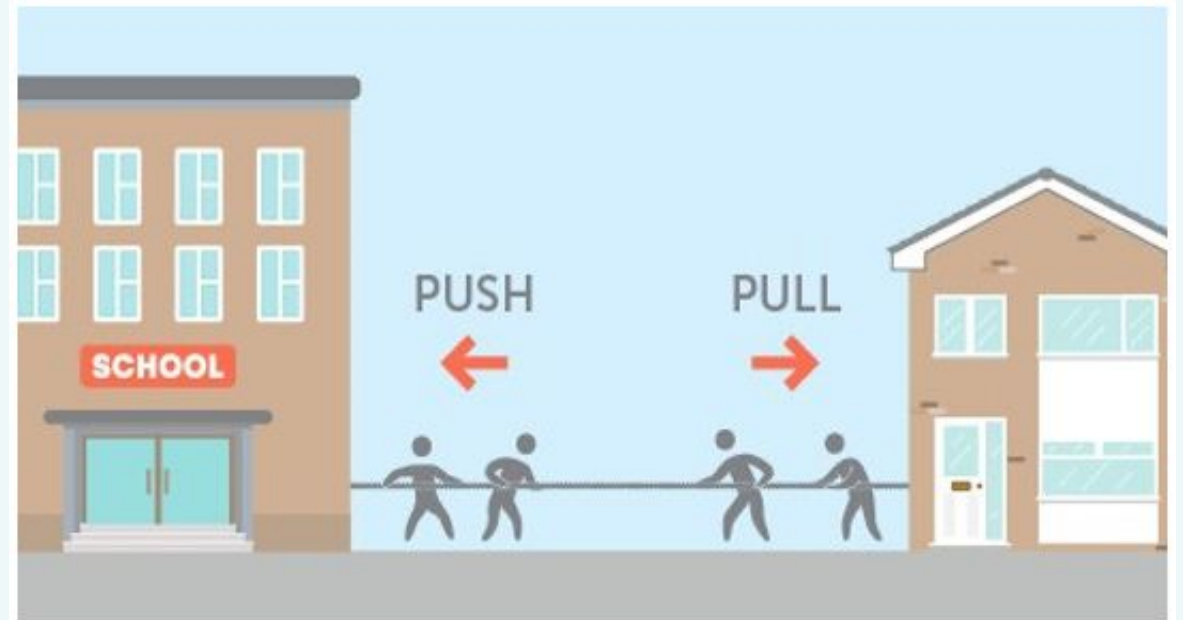
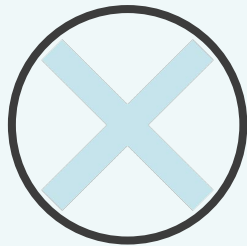
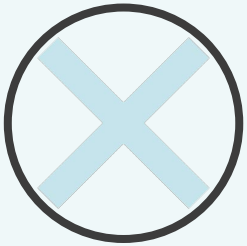


Image - Push and pull factors associated with non-attendance - Gloucestershire County Council

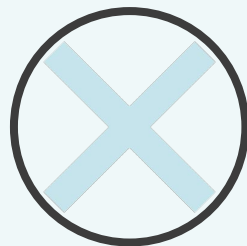
EBSA is not...



Truancy



School Withdrawal



School Refusal

Seeing beyond the behaviour

EBSA is not a new phenomenon associated with the coronavirus pandemic.

EBSA is a pattern of absence whereby reluctance, or refusal, to attend or stay in an educational setting has its base in anxiety or fear. Risk factors vary and it is important to understand the reasons for poor/non-attendance.

EBSA and neurodivergence

Children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) are **50%** more likely to struggle with school attendance, with **31%** of students with autism persistently absent (*Office for National Statistics, 2021; Ambitious about Autism, 2022*).

There are many reasons why school can be an overwhelming, anxiety-inducing and traumatic place for neurodivergent children. Some of these can include:

- High anxiety from academic pressure, change, uncertainty, social anxiety
- Bullying or being made fun of for not fitting in
- Friendship issues and feeling isolated
- Sensory challenges experienced as overwhelming
- Not feeling safe at school or past traumatic experiences
- Struggling to learn or adhere to expectations or demands

When Neurodivergent young people show signs of EBSA it is useful to:

- Listen to them and unpick what they are finding difficult to tolerate
- Work in Partnership with schools and SENCO to explore difficulties and reasonable adjustments that can be made



Signs of EBSA

Periods of prolonged absence

Persistent lateness and identifiable patterns within non-school attendance

Parent/carer unable to support CYP to school

Displays of emotional dysregulation and/or distress

Providing minor reasons for school absences

CYP experiences anxiety in relation to home factors

CYP displays greater reliance upon family members

Concerns around academic progress due to missed education

Increased anxiety in relation to learning and/or poor self-concept as a learner

Low self-esteem and/or lack of confidence

Struggling in relation to peer relationships and/or social situations

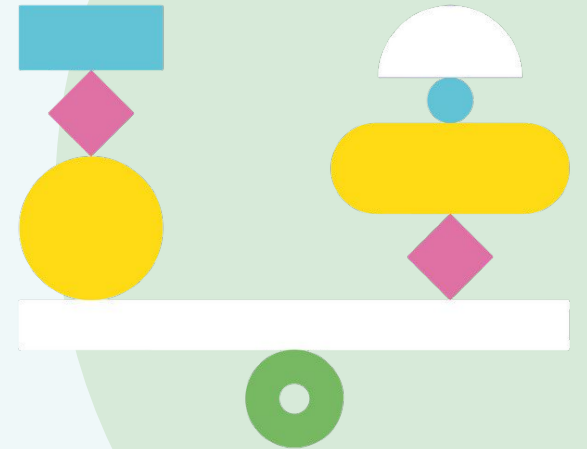
Physical symptoms i.e., nausea, panic attacks etc, linked to anxious thoughts

Risk and Resilience

Various children may exhibit reluctance to attend school for different reasons, typically stemming from a complex interplay of multiple factors rather than a singular cause, ultimately contributing to EBSA.

Identified risk factors often involve a combination of predisposing elements interacting with changing circumstances.

Multiple factors within the school, family and the child themselves can contribute to children being more vulnerable to developing EBSA.



Vulnerability Factors

School	Family	Child
Bullying	Change in family dynamics e.g. separation/divorce	Anxiety interacting in unfamiliar settings
Difficulties in a specific subject	Parental physical/mental health problems	Low self-esteem
Transition to new school	Young Carer	Physical illness
Journey to School	Youngest child in the family	Age: 5-6,11-12, 13-14
Exams	Loss or bereavement	Learning difficulties Developmental problems or neurodivergence, specifically if unidentified or unsupported
Peer or staff relationship difficulties	High levels of family stress	Separation anxiety
	Family history of EBSA	Traumatic events

Strategies and approaches

Kearney and Silverman (1990) describe four types of variable which can maintain school avoidance behaviour:

- To avoid something or situations that elicits negative feelings or high levels of stress
- To escape difficult social situations
- To spend more time with significant others
- To spend more time out of school as it is more fun or stimulating

These variables can guide the choice of strategies and approaches; however, it is important to acknowledge that more than one variable may be present. Exploring the Push and Pull Factors can assist in finding a person-centred focus point for the purpose of finding the most suitable approach

Push and Pull Factors

- Risk and resilience factors can play an important part in EBSA. It is helpful to look at these in terms of PUSH and PULL.
- PUSH factors can increase a child's ability to attend school (RESILIENCE).
- PULL factors can reduce a child's ability to attend school (RISK).
- EBSA is most likely to occur when the PULL factors overwhelm or outweigh the PUSH factors. These are factors that are present which can reduce a child's ability to attend school.

Push Factors

School	Home	Child
Positive transition to school	Parental encouragement to attend school	Good awareness of feelings, triggers and coping strategies
Good teacher and peer relationships	Working parents - staying home is not an option	Ability to view things from alternative perspectives
Needs identified and met	Good routine e.g. sleep	Motivation for future goals
A sense of belonging	Good social networks	
Friends are attending school		

Pull Factors

School	Home	Child
Support needs being unidentified or unsupported	Parental illness	Lack of self-awareness & regulation skills
Bullying	Preferring the safety and flexibility of routines at home	Negative thoughts
Friendship difficulties	Experiencing less sensory stimulation at home	Anxiety
High academic pressure		Lack of motivation: School is seen as not important
Difficult relationships with teachers		Sensory difficulties
Dislike of certain subjects		Poor experience of school in the past
Friends are not attending school		On-line social community

Listen to understand



Focus: Close all open brain tabs. Visibly remove distractions. Phone away. Computer off



Be curious: Step into their world and ask open questions, avoid sounding judgmental



Validate: Identify and acknowledge their feelings and experiences. Offer frequent reassurance



Reflect: Use your own words to show you're listening and to check understanding



Silence: Embrace silences. Wait for them to fill the gaps even if it feels awkward

National picture

NHS Survey (2022) 18% of CYP 7 - 16 probable mental health disorder (12.1% in 2017)

School Absence is significantly higher in pupils with SEND

DfE (2022) persistent absence - 10%+ of schools sessions missed - risen to 24.2% of pupils nationwide.

This was estimated in 2018/9 as 1 in 9 pupils so recent figures show persistent absence has more than doubled.

