

Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA)

Good practice guidance for primary and secondary schools

Hounslow Educational Psychology Service

This document and the supporting leaflets are distributed to schools via the Educational Psychology Service. Other teams are welcome to signpost schools to this resource but should refrain from reprinting or distributing it themselves, this is to ensure that schools are supported to use this guidance effectively with an emphasis on the psychological principles it is based on.



Table of Contents

Introduction and acknowledgements.....	3
What is Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance?	4
Definition and description.....	4
How often does it occur?.....	5
Causes of EBSNA	5
Anxiety and EBSNA	6
Signs and symptoms	8
Short and long term consequences	8
Understanding the factors affecting EBSNA	9
Bronfenbrenner's ecosystems.....	9
School, family and child factors.....	11
Risk and Resilience factors	11
Seligman's positive psychology (PERMA).....	12
Good practice guidance.....	13
Identification and information gathering.....	13
A Good Practice Guide for Schools	14
Identifying areas of Risk.....	15
Working with the child/young person.....	16
Working with school staff	16
Working with parents/carers.....	17
Interpreting the information and planning an intervention	19
Action Planning	20
Review.....	21
EBSNA and Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC)	22
Supporting students.....	22
References and Resources	23
References	23
Anxiety Management.....	26
General Emotional Wellbeing & Mental Health Literature	26
Books for young children	27
Appendix 1 Profile of Risk of EBSNA.....	28
Appendix 2 Information gathering and assessment.....	31
Appendix 3 Example support plan	32

Introduction and acknowledgements

Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA) is a broad umbrella term used to describe children and young people who have severe difficulty attending school due to emotional factors. This often results in prolonged absences from school. Sometimes, parents manage to get their child to attend school but report severe difficulties in doing so.

This document has been produced by **Hounslow Educational Psychology Service**. It has been written to inform school staff and guide their approach when supporting children and young people exhibiting EBSNA and their families.

This guidance is adapted from and heavily influenced by four pre-existing and widely available documents on this topic and therefore thanks must be given to:

- West Sussex Educational Psychology Service guidance entitled 'Emotionally-Based School Avoidance-Good Practice Guidance for Schools and Support Agencies'
- Cambridgeshire County Council guidance entitled 'Emotionally Based School Refusal: a guide for primary and secondary schools; March 2020'
- Babcock LDP Educational Psychology Service, a joint venture with Devon County Council, guidance entitled 'Developing Effective Support Systems for Young People Experiencing Anxiety Based School Avoidance: An Exploratory Study and Good Practice Guidance for schools'
- 'An exploration into the parental experience of Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance in young people: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis' by Rachel Browne. A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctorate in Child, Community & Educational Psychology. Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust/ University of Essex, May 2018.

Where appropriate, pre-existing resources that are widely available have been signposted, links have been provided and the documents credited. This guidance was published in August 2020.

Contributors to the guidance include:

- Dr Claire Phillips
- Nadia Ashong and Trainee Educational Psychologist.

It is worth noting that this document does not cover:

- Non-attendance that is understood to be based on non-emotional factors
- Wider mental health conditions
- Other mental health conditions that are likely to affect attendance and to have an emotional consequence, such as Chronic Fatigue Syndrome
- Post 16 provision.



What is Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance?

Definition and description

Anxiety based school avoidance, school refusal, school phobia, school anxiety and emotionally based school non-attendance are all interchangeable terms used to describe children who experience high levels of distress and anxiety that prevents them from going to school. Some students have low school attendance because of illness or truancy, but others can find attending school difficult as a result of emotional reasons. Children exhibit psychological and physical symptoms such as sadness, panic, aggression, stomach pain, nausea and headaches (Berg, Nichols & Pritchard, 1969).

Thambirajah, Grandison and De-Hayes (2008) chose to use the neutral term 'school non-attendance' as it is a broad umbrella term which is used to describe all pupils who do not attend school. It labels the behaviour without making any inferences or suggestions about the cause and without attributing blame. Thambirajah et al. (2008) consider 'school non-attendance' as a spectrum of different behaviours, which can range from occasional reluctance and occasional absence to extreme reluctance and persistent non-attendance. They highlight that *'children who fail to attend school are not a uniform group and school non-attendance, especially when it is prolonged and persistent, remains a puzzling and complex problem'* (p.11). The term 'Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance' (EBSNA) will be used throughout this document. Other terms will be used only if directly quoted from the literature or if in reference to the literature that employs them. Use of the term EBSNA is an attempt to frame the nature of this condition in a way that is descriptive, places less emphasis on the 'within child' model, and instead considers a more eco-systemic model, which explores systems and relationships around the child.

EBSNA is different from truancy and other forms of non-attendance in that a key aspect of the avoidance stems from significant levels of anxiety. Students struggling with EBSNA can find it very challenging to attend school and some do not attend at all. Others demonstrate sporadic patterns of attendance and some are able to attend successfully with modified or reduced timetables and high levels of support.

It is well documented that EBSNA is caused by a complex number of factors linked to the child, family and school context. Anxiety has been identified as a key feature of EBSNA. Although a certain level of anxiety is considered a normal and natural part of life, some children and young people may experience heightened levels of anxiety which impact on their functioning and school experiences.

When anxiety is linked to school, the student can experience severe emotional distress when faced with attending school; this can be displayed through panic symptoms, crying, complaints of feeling ill or emotional and/or aggressive outbursts. Other behaviours include refusal to leave the house or get ready for school, or reluctance to enter the school on arrival. Some students have specific anxieties around separation from their parent or carer and others have anxieties linked to aspects of school life.

Berg et al. (1969) in their study, use the following four factors to identify EBSNA:

1. A severe difficulty in attending school which often amounts to prolonged absences.
2. Severe emotional upset which is shown by symptoms such as excessive fearfulness, anger, frustration, tantrums, misery or complaints of feeling ill without obvious organic cause, when faced with going to school.
3. Staying at home with the knowledge of parents, when the child should be at school.
4. Absence of significant antisocial disorders.

How often does it occur?

As there is no single definition or cut off when considering what might constitute EBSNA, it is difficult to estimate the prevalence. Estimates in the UK literature suggest that school refusal behaviours with an element of anxiety affect about 1–2% of school aged children, with higher prevalence among secondary school pupils (Elliott, 1999; Kearney, 2008).



Prevalence rates are similar across genders, and it tends to be more common in children who have already started primary school and those who are transitioning to secondary school. Similar patterns of school avoidance behaviours are apparent in Australia, America and various European countries (Kearney, 2008).

Difficulties children have in articulating their distress, as well as the difficulties that parents and school staff have in understanding the young person's emotional experience of school, are often key barriers in identifying and supporting these children (Thambirajah et al., 2008).

For some young people, the distress may be obvious in their presentation and chronic non-attendance. However, for others, these difficulties may not be so easily identifiable. These young people may demonstrate sporadic attendance, missing the odd day here and there or particular



lessons, or may only be able to attend school when provided with a high level of support and a modified timetable. The onset of EBSNA may be sudden or gradual. The literature suggests that there tend to be peaks in EBSNA corresponding to transition between school phases (King & Bernstein, 2001). It is also important to highlight that some young people with EBSNA may appear to recover relatively quickly from the initial upsets of the morning and this can lead school staff and others to question the legitimacy of the EBSNA; however, it is important to hold in mind models of anxiety, as it is not unusual for the anxiety to quickly dissipate once the perceived threat is removed (Thambirajah et al., 2008).

Causes of EBSNA

There is no single cause for EBSNA and there are likely to be various contributing factors for why a young person may be finding it difficult to attend school. It is often underpinned by a number of complex and interlinked factors related to the young person, the family and the school environment (Thambirajah et al., 2008).

Taking a behavioural perspective and using a model of functional analysis to explore school refusal, Kearney and Silverman (1990) identified a four-function taxonomy of school avoidance behaviour as either:

1. Avoiding fear/anxiety linked to school
2. Avoiding anxiety provoking social situations
3. Reducing separation anxiety/ gaining of attention
4. Providing tangible reinforcement (e.g. autonomy, comfort).

Research has shown that there is a **high level of psychiatric comorbidity among young people who present with EBSNA**, with **anxiety and depression** being identified as the most prevalent (Egger, Costello, & Angold, 2003; Fremont, 2003). Elliott (1999) concludes that individuals prone to anxiety, depression and social difficulties may be more likely than others to develop school refusal behaviour. In some cases, **children who display EBSNA behaviours may have underlying special educational needs that have not yet been clearly identified** and are perhaps not very apparent when the child is in school. **Following these good practice guidelines may help to identify these difficulties and may help to raise awareness that the child or young person requires additional support.**

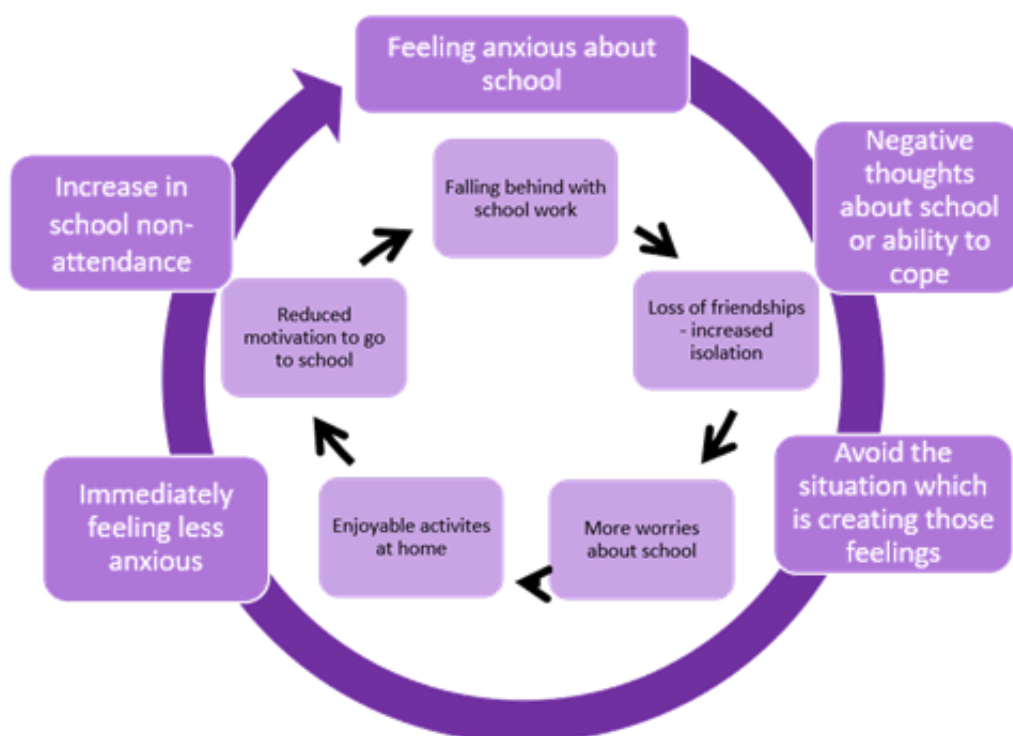
Anxiety and EBSNA

Although everybody experiences anxiety sometimes and a certain level of anxiety is natural and common, young people who demonstrate EBSNA often experience severe anxiety. This often occurs alongside negative thought patterns. The young person may experience anxious and fearful thoughts around attending school and their ability to cope with school. These feelings may also be accompanied by physiological symptoms of anxiety such as difficulty breathing, headaches, nausea, increased heart rate, vomiting, shaking, sweating, and may start the night



before, or even a few days before school. When anxiety is linked to school, the student can experience severe emotional distress when faced with attending school; this can be displayed through panic symptoms, crying, complaints of feeling ill or emotional and/or aggressive outbursts. Some students have specific anxieties around separation from their parent or carer and others have anxieties linked to aspects of school life.

In order to avoid these overwhelming emotions and the fear associated with school attendance, the young person may withdraw from the situation, refusing to get ready for school or to leave the house or enter the school. The young person may also turn to hostile behaviours as a means to avoid the threatening situation and to try to control what feels like a very 'out-of-control' situation (Thambirajah et al., 2008). These behaviours, and the avoidance of school, may then contribute to the maintenance of EBSNA over time. Heyne and Rollings (2002) suggest that it is crucial to consider the child's perceptions of their ability to cope, including perceived social and academic competence, because negative thoughts about one's ability to cope can lead to further feelings of worry and if left unaddressed, may undermine attempts to improve attendance. The following diagram shows how anxiety can impact on EBSNA and how it can perpetuate the problem.



The Anxiety Equation

Salkovskis (1997) created the anxiety equation based on the work of Beck and Emery (1985). Anxious individuals tend to overestimate the likelihood of something negative happening and how bad it will be, while underestimating their capacity to cope. Various processes tend to occur with anxiety which inadvertently maintain the anxiety. These include safety seeking behaviours, changes in attention, involuntary imagery, changes in memory and rumination.



Research has clearly established the links between parental and child mental health. It suggests that parental mental ill health (when parents find it hard to cope with their own anxiety or sadness) can have an adverse impact on their child's mental health and development. In a cyclical effect, child psychological and psychiatric disorders, and the stress of parenting children with additional needs, can impact on adult mental health. This should be taken into consideration when working with parents and carers.

Avoidance of school due to anxiety can reinforce the student's anxiety and reduce feelings of coping, therefore, it is well recognised, that early identification and support is vital. Furthermore, supporting a child or young person who is struggling to manage their anxieties to be successful in school is likely to have a positive impact on their resilience and ability to cope with challenges in the future. Lauchlan (2003) reviewed the research and argued that there is no single intervention or approach that should be used. Because the reasons for school avoidance are complex, each student will require a personalised assessment and support plan.

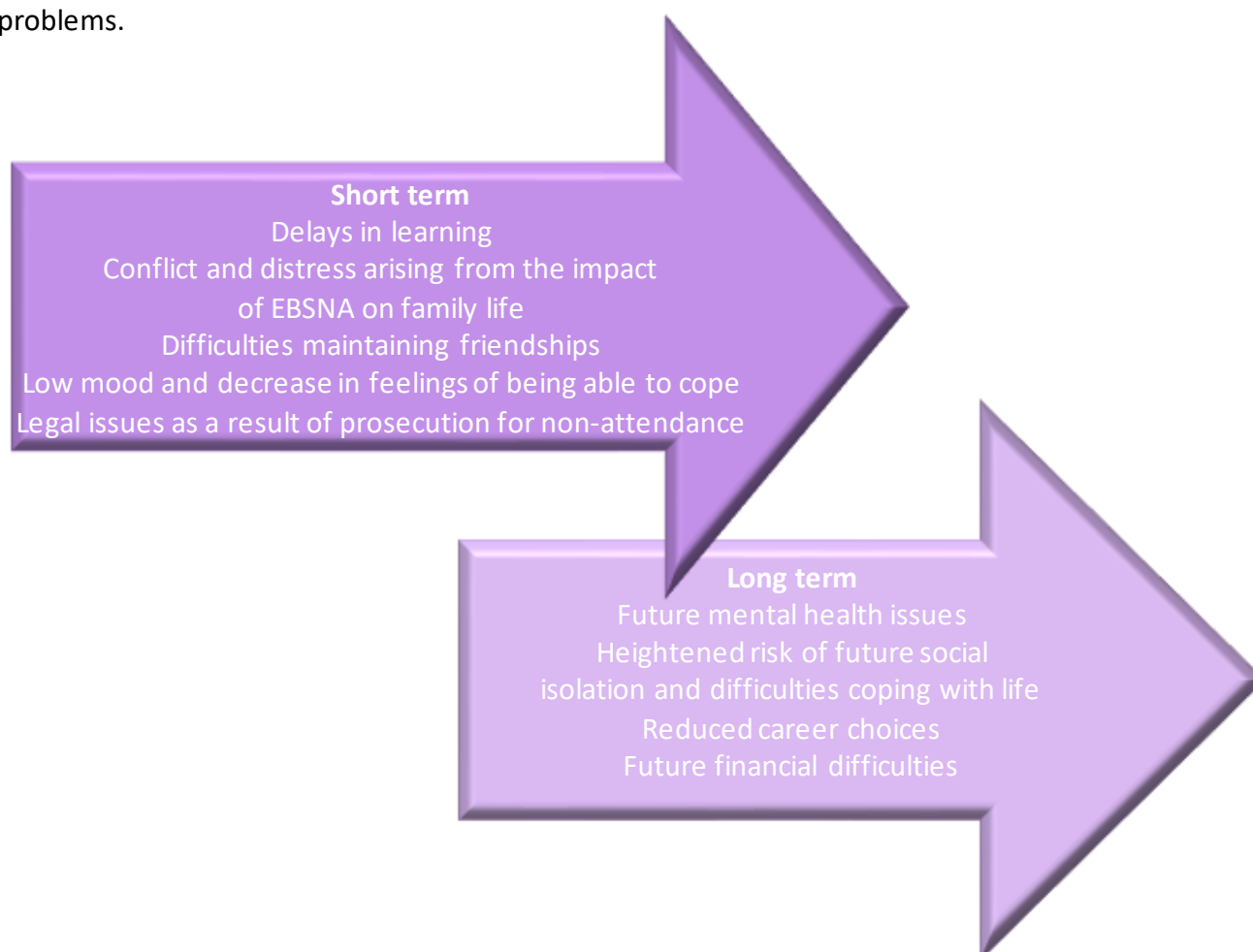
Signs and symptoms

Internalising factors	Externalising factors
• General and social anxiety • Fear • Self-consciousness • Depression and suicidal behaviour • Fatigue and somatic complaints such as headaches, stomach pain, sore throat • Common signs of anxiety including, difficulty breathing, feeling sick, sweating, racing heart, pins and needles	• Defiance and non-compliance • Running away from home or school • Verbal and physical aggression • Emotional and angry outbursts • Clinginess • Refusing to get ready for school or to get out of the car or the bus

These signs are likely to be worse on weekday mornings and less noticeable or absent at weekends and school holidays.

Short and long term consequences

The presentation of EBSNA behaviours tends to be gradual and is often seen in conjunction with anxiety and/or depression (Fremont, 2003). Furthermore, research suggests that this group of young people are at greater risk of developing mental health difficulties later in life (King & Bernstein, 2001). Bernstein, Warren, Massie and Thuras (1999); Flakierska-Praquin, Lindstrom and Gillberg (1997) highlight many short and long-term consequences including; academic difficulties, peer relational problems, family problems, academic underachievement, poorer occupational and employment outcomes, and increased risk of adult psychiatric problems.

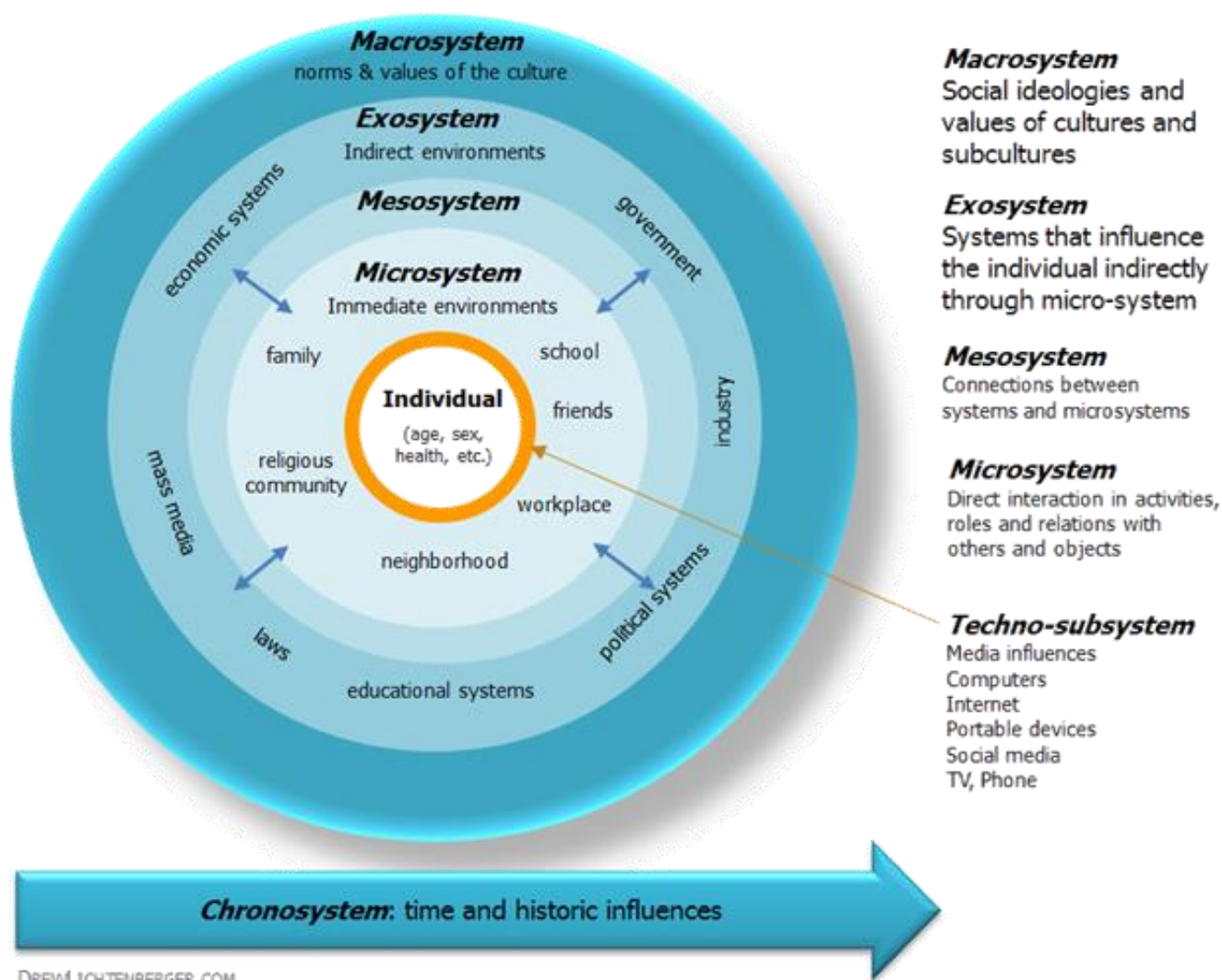


Understanding the factors affecting EBSNA

Bronfenbrenner's ecosystems

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1992) is one of the most accepted explanations regarding the influence of social environments on human development. This theory argues that the environment you grow up in effects every facet of your life. Bronfenbrenner's theory defines complex 'layers' of environment, each having an effect on a child's development.

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model of Human Development



The Education Act (Department for Education [DfE], 1996) and The Children, Schools and Families Act (DfE, 2010) places local authorities under a duty to arrange full time education for all children and young people over the age of five, unless reasons that relate to their medical condition means that this would not be in their best interests.

The Education Act (1996) states clearly that parents must ensure that their child has access to an education. In cases of low/non-attendance, parents are held accountable as, it assumed they have the capacity to enforce their child's attendance. Research has suggested that supporting parents with behaviour management skills can support a child's attendance (Lauchlan, 2003). Local authorities have the power to prosecute parents who fail to comply with a school attendance order (section 443 of the Education Act 1996) or fail to ensure their child's regular attendance at a school (section 444 of the Education Act 1996). The focus was placed on the parent's responsibility to "ensure their child attends school, failure to ensure this results in financial penalties" (Taylor, 2012). The use of financial penalties and legal action is used as a way of 'motivating' parents to improve their situation.

Pellegrini (2007) suggests that the legal interventions listed above, highlight the dominant discourse held by governments which identifies parents as the '*locus of the problem*' (p.67), where the child or young person are passive and do not have their voice heard. He argues that the focus on the family means that important systemic factors are ignored.

Shepherd (2011) argues that despite years of government interventions aimed at improving attendance through sanctioning parents, there is no evidence that legal sanctions improve attendance. Figures from the Ministry of Justice in 2010 showed that parental prosecutions for poor attendance in England increased between 2007 and 2009 by 27.6% to a total of 10,697 parents in 2009 but did not correlate with any improvement in levels of attendance. Shepherd believes that the origins of low school attendance are complex in nature and require a more nuanced intervention strategy rather than penalising parents.

The Ofsted Education Inspection Framework (Ofsted, 2019) states that inspectors will make a judgement on behaviour and attitudes by evaluating the extent to which the provider has high expectations for learners' behaviour and conduct and applies these expectations consistently and fairly. Focus is placed on the following:

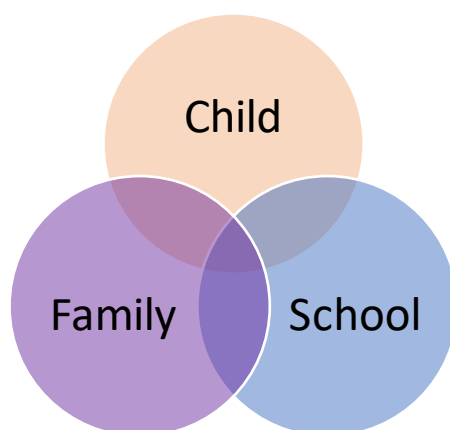
- Learners' attitudes to their education or training are positive. They are committed to their learning, know how to study effectively and do so, are resilient to setbacks and take pride in their achievements.
- Learners have high attendance and are punctual.
- Relationships among learners and staff reflect a positive and respectful culture. Leaders, teachers and learners create an environment where bullying, peer-on-peer abuse or discrimination are not tolerated. If they do occur, staff deal with issues quickly and effectively, and do not allow them to spread.



The 2020 Corona Virus pandemic has caused unprecedented national school closures for several months. Instead of the previous emphasis on all children attending school, schools have been mostly closed to all students and return to school has been gradual with a period of non-compulsory re-opening. This change in expectation that school is not always compulsory, as well as the anxiety caused by aspects of the pandemic, is likely to have a long-term impact on some children, especially those already experiencing anxiety or early signs of EBSNA.

School, family and child factors

It is well documented that EBSNA is caused by a complex number of factors linked to the child, family and school context and it is important to consider factors in all of these areas when attempting to understand an individual experiencing EBSNA. It is also important to remember that every case is different and needs to be looked at individually.



Risk and Resilience factors

These are sometimes referred to as **push** and **pull** factors.

Risk factors (or pull factors)

Just as with general mental health, there have been factors identified that place children and young people at greater risk of EBSNA. It is usually a combination of predisposing factors interacting with a change in circumstances which leads to the pattern of behaviour described as EBSNA. The predisposing factors may be present in the nature of the school, the child's family or the child themselves. The exact nature of the predisposing vulnerability and the precipitating events will vary according to an individual child's unique set of characteristics, circumstances and experiences, but it is still possible to identify factors associated with that vulnerability and the potential triggers leading to EBSNA.

School factors	Family factors	Child Factors
• Bullying (the most common school factor) including cyber bullying • Difficulties in a specific subject • Transition to secondary school, key stage or change of school • Structure of the school day • Academic demands/high levels of pressure and performance orientated classrooms • Transport or journey to school • Exams • Peer or staff relationship difficulties • Size of school • Some teachers not identifying or understanding the anxiety in the past	• Family events such as separation and divorce or change in the family dynamic • Parent physical and mental health problems • Overprotective parenting style • Dysfunctional family interactions • Being the youngest child in the family • Loss and Bereavement • High levels of family stress • Family history of EBSNA • Being a young carer	• Difficulties with social interaction • Undiagnosed or unsupported needs that make it hard to access the learning environment and curriculum • Fear of failure and poor self-confidence • Feeling overwhelmed by academic or social demands • Physical illness • Age (5-6, 11-12 & 13-14 years) • Separation anxiety from parent • Traumatic events • Temperament (some children may have a predisposition to developing problems relating to anxiety)

Resilience factors (or push factors)

It is very important to also identify and build areas of strength or resilience for the child, young person, family and school, which may help to 'protect' the child and promote school attendance.



The literature indicates that EBSNA is most likely to occur when the risks are greater than resilience, when stress and anxiety exceeds support, and when the 'pull' factors that promote school avoidance overwhelm the 'push' factors that encourage school attendance.

Seligman's positive psychology

Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, Accomplishments (PERMA)

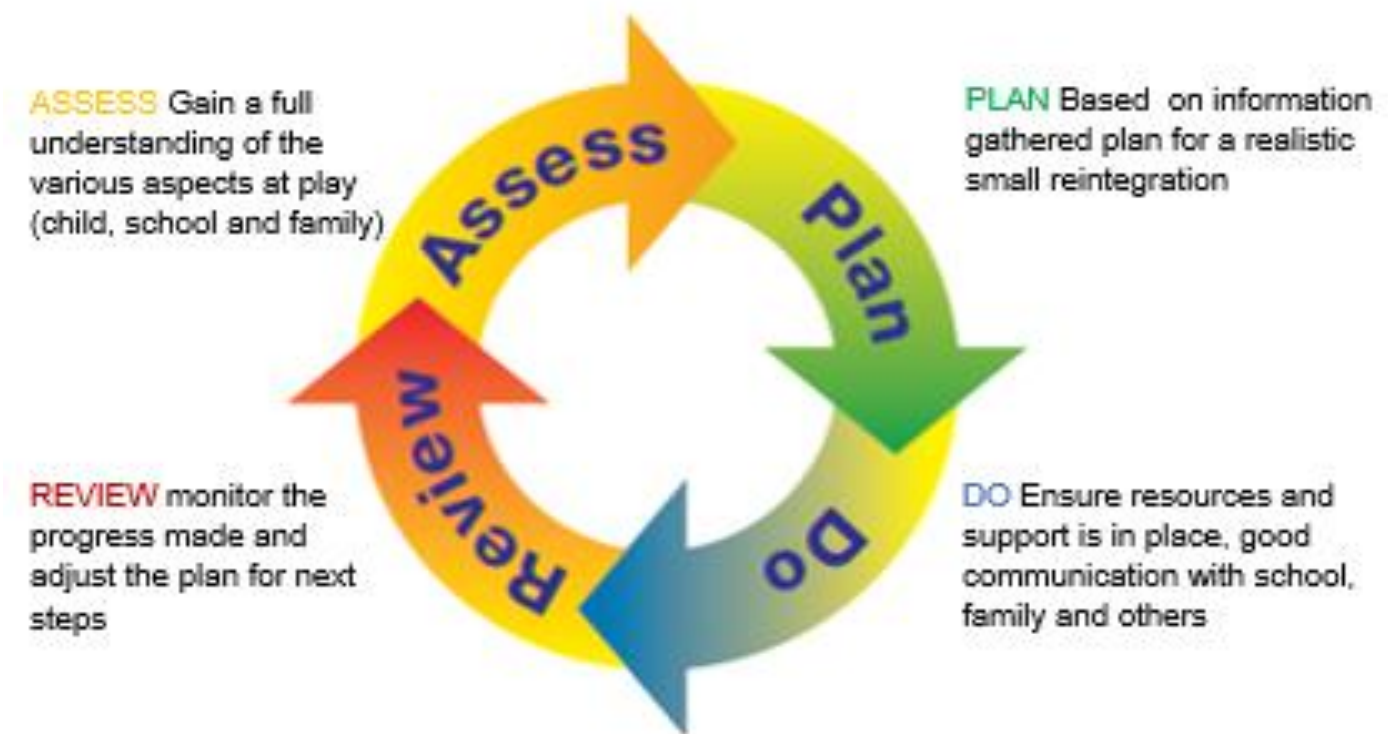
In his study of authentic happiness and wellbeing, Seligman (2002) identifies five factors affecting human functioning and leading to wellbeing. Seligman encourages professionals working with children, young people and their families to build on these five facets of school life.



Good practice guidance

Identification and information gathering

School plays a key role in the identification of children and young people who are currently experiencing, or at risk of EBSNA. It is very important to be proactive with EBSNA. The longer the problems remain unaddressed, the poorer the outcome, as the difficulties and behaviours become entrenched. Schools need to be vigilant in monitoring attendance of young people, noticing any patterns in non-attendance or changes to behaviours. It is important for schools to develop effective whole school systems to support young people, be vigilant to early indicators and employ a thorough **assess**, **plan**, **do** and **review** cycle placing the young person at the heart of the interventions.



Research¹ by Babcock LDP Educational Psychology Service (2016) has shown that feelings of **safety, security and belonging** were important factors in supporting attendance and inclusion of students displaying anxiety-based school avoidance behaviours, as was having **a good relationship with at least one member of staff** who they felt they could rely on for support.

¹ Research-‘Developing effective support systems for young people experiencing anxiety based school avoidance: an exploratory study and good practice guidance for schools: Babcock LDP Educational Psychology Service’
<https://www.babcockldp.co.uk/inclusion-and-ehwb/anxiety-based-school-avoidance/support-for-schools>

A Good Practice Guide for Schools

The diagram below shows the school factors associated with the successful inclusion of young people who display EBSNA.



A 'Good Practice when Supporting Students Displaying School Avoidance: Self-Audit Tool for schools' from Devon County Council can also be found at <https://www.babcockldp.co.uk/inclusion-and-ehwb/anxiety-based-school-avoidance/support-for-schools>.

Identifying areas of Risk

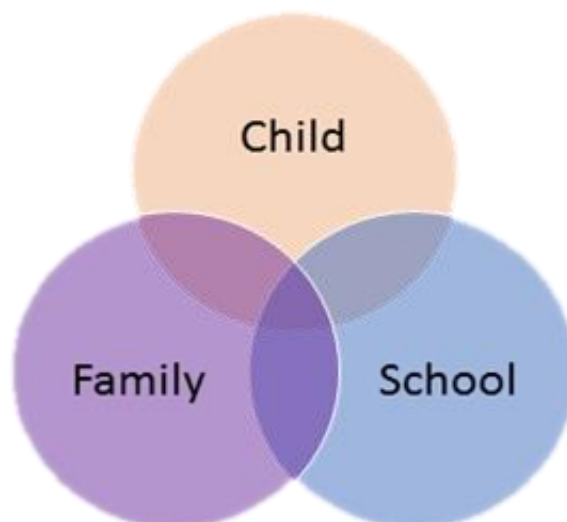
A Profile of Risk of EBSNA can be found in [Appendix 1 Profile of Risk of EBSNA](#). This can help practitioners identify areas of risk. The schedule looks at five key risk areas for EBSNA. The checklist is for use alongside the usual attendance monitoring systems in school, e.g. SIMS and consideration of patterns of attendance, to screen for possible EBSNA in relation to non-attendance.

Once a difficulty has been identified there should be a **prompt investigation** into the reasons for the difficulties. In order for any intervention or support plan to be successful it is essential to gain an **understanding of the various aspects causing and maintaining the EBSNA behaviours**.

Thambirajah et al. (2008) state that the main aims of this analysis are:

- To confirm that the child is displaying EBSNA as opposed to truancy or parentally condoned absence
- To assess the extent and severity of (a) a school absence, (b) anxiety and (c) ascertain the types of anxiety
- To gather information regarding the various child, family and school factors that may be contributing to the EBSNA in a given child
- To integrate the available information to arrive at a practical working hypothesis as a prelude to planning effective interventions

Due to the complex nature of EBSNA no fixed 'assessment process' can be followed. However, it is essential that the views of the young person, the family and key school personnel are gathered and listened to. The exact combination of vulnerabilities will be unique to the individual and therefore requires careful assessment. It is always a useful starting point for school staff in thinking about a child and a young person's needs within the context of the system of relationships that form his or her environment.



When considering specific cases, it may be helpful to complete a ‘push and pull’ analysis of the relevant factors. Below is a step by step process:



1. Identify the factors that might be influencing attendance at school;
2. These factors should be split into ‘within the child’, ‘within the family’, ‘school peers’ and ‘school community’.
3. The ‘push’ factors are those that may be encouraging to the student to go to school.
4. The ‘pull’ factors are those that may be promoting school non-attendance
5. When the ‘pull’ factors outweigh the ‘push’ factors, young people generally choose not to attend school



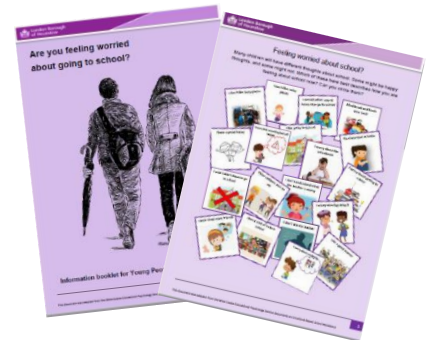
Working with the child/young person

Ideas for working with the child or young person can be found in separate Hounslow guidance entitled ‘Are you feeling worried about going to school?’ (for older children) and ‘Feeling worried about school?’ (for primary aged children).

Scaling can also be a useful tool in terms of taking a quick measure of how a young person might be thinking or feeling. For example:

On a scale of 0-10 with 10 being ‘I feel fine about school’ or ‘I enjoy school’

- Where would you put yourself on the scale right now?
- How about last year?
- What would need to happen for you to be one point higher?



Working with school staff

It is essential that information from members of staff who work most closely with the child or young person is obtained. We all respond differently according to the environment, situations or task and with different people. Each member of staff may have valuable information to help identify triggers for anxiety and strategies the young person responds positively to. In particular it is important to seek out the views of any members of staff the young person speaks positively about and any member of staff where relationships may be more difficult.

Key information to gather includes:

- What are the young person’s strengths
- What is going well
- Any difficulties they have noticed
- Peer relationships
- Relationships with adults
- Response to academic tasks
- If they have witnessed emotional distress what did this look like and what caused it
- What support or differentiation is put in place and how the young person responds to this
- Any ideas for further support

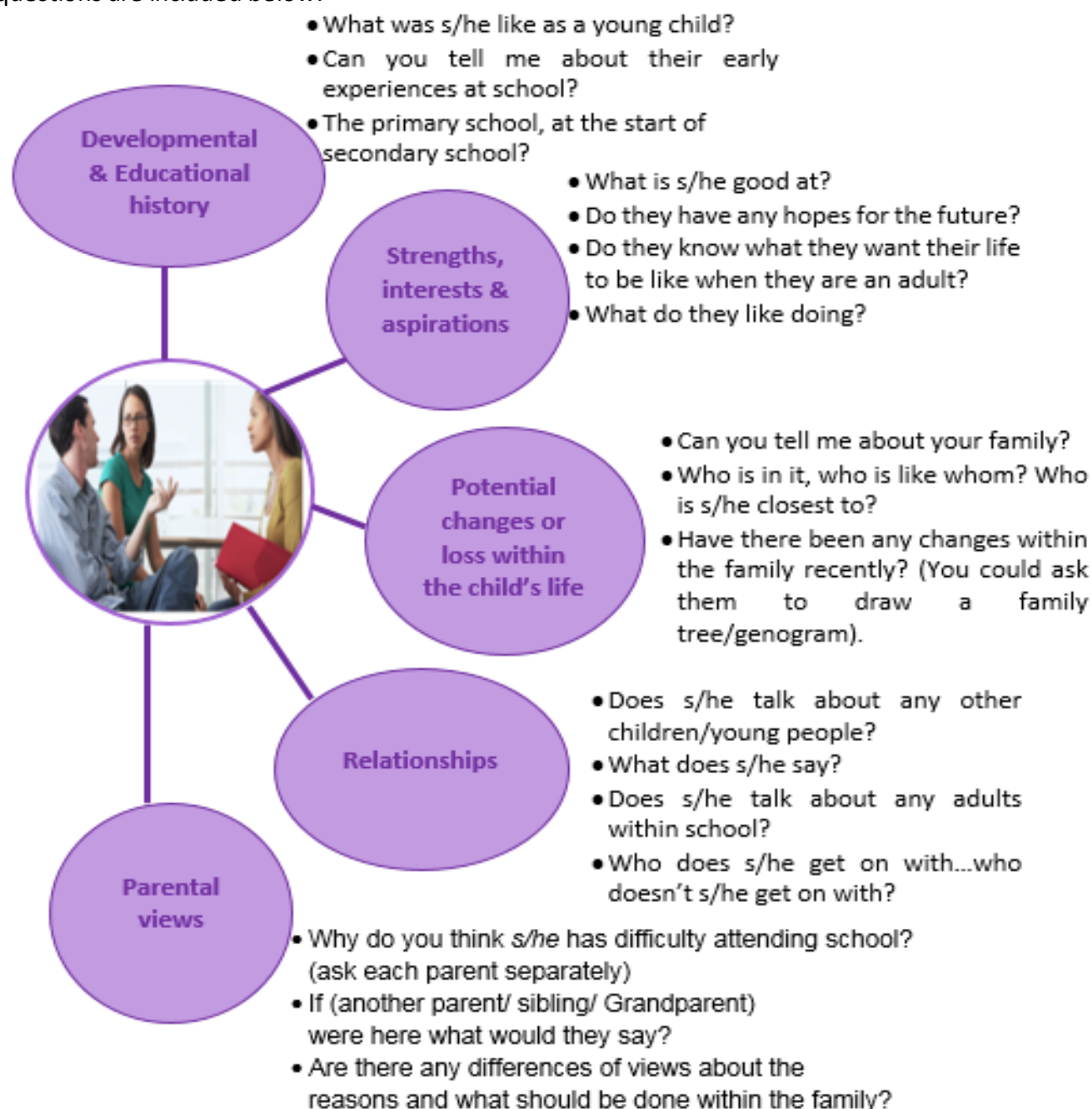
It is also essential to consider whether the child has **unidentified special educational needs, medical needs or a disability**. If they are not already involved, school staff should consult with the SENCo.

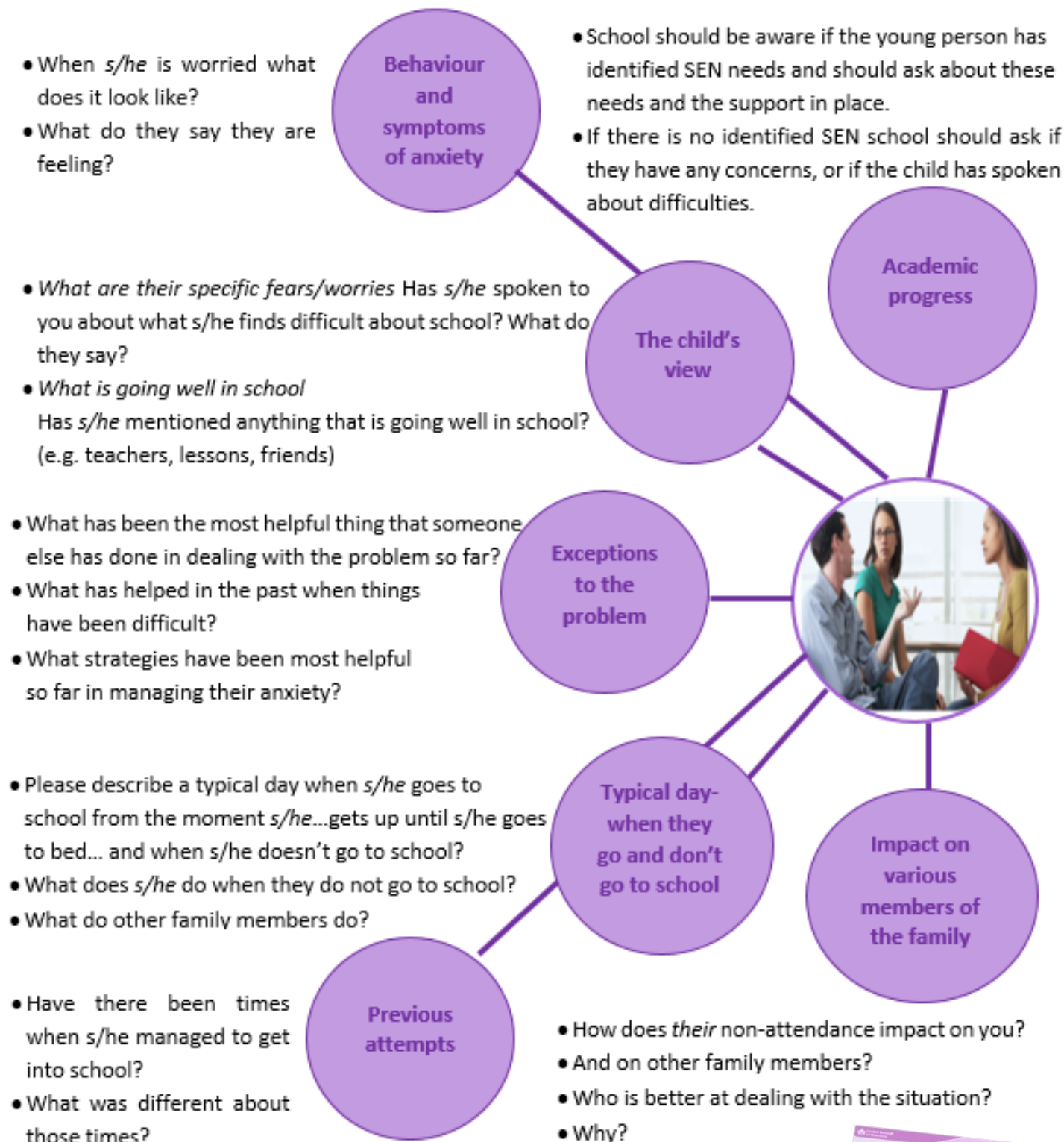
Ideas for supporting class teachers can be found at <https://www.babcockldp.co.uk/inclusion-and-ehwb/anxiety-based-school-avoidance/support-for-schools>

Working with parents/carers

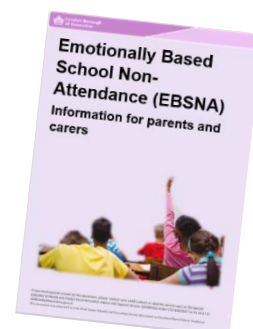
Parents may find it difficult to talk about the concerns they have and the difficulties they experience in trying to get their child into school. It is important that school take time to build a collaborative partnership working together in the best interest of the child. Sometimes parents may have had similar experiences to their child and may experience their own anxiety making it especially difficult for them.

During the initial meeting, it is important to gather background information, establish the current situation and the parent's views. Questions should be sensitive and the person asking should employ active listening skills. It is advised that regular contact is made with parents; school staff should identify who will be the key person to communicate with parents and agree on how they will do this. Areas to cover and example questions are included below:





Please see Hounslow guidance document 'EBSNA: Information for parents and carers' for more information.



Interpreting the information and planning an intervention

Following the gathering of information from the child, family, school and any other professional it is essential that this information is gathered together, and 'sense' is made of it. An overview of the whole picture and various factors involved should be obtained and potential hypotheses formed. These should then inform the return to school support plan.

The following information is designed to help you integrate the information gathered from the young person, school and family. It is not designed to be a questionnaire but a tool to be completed after the information gathering to help you collate, integrate and analyse the information gathered from a variety of sources. A blank copy can be found in [Appendix 2 Information Gathering and Assessment](#).

At the interpretation and formulation stage schools can ask for support from their Educational Psychologist to assist in the identification of the function of the EBSNA behaviour and to help with action planning and intervention. This could be in on the telephone or in person.



DESCRIPTION OF BEHAVIOUR

What is the current rate of attendance? Are there any patterns to non-attendance? Particular days or lessons of non-attendance? History of behaviour; when did it first occur, have there been similar difficulties? Behaviour and symptoms of anxiety – what does it look like? What does the child say about any specific fears and difficulties?

RISK FACTORS SCHOOL, CHILD AND FAMILY

Developmental and educational history (health, medical, sensory or social factors) Any changes in family dynamic? (Separation, loss, birth of a sibling, health issues of other family members) Any other needs within the family?



STRENGTHS AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS



What strengths do they have? Do they have any aspirations or ambitions?
What positive relationships do they have at home and at school (peers and staff)? What positive experiences have they had at school?
What was different about the times when the young person was able to get into school? What has been helpful in the past?

FORMULATION AND INTEGRATION OF VARIOUS FACTORS

What is the understanding of why the young person is demonstrating these behaviours? Are there any differences of views? What risk factors have been identified (child, school and family) What strengths have been identified that can be built upon?

What is the function of the behaviour – is it:

- To avoid something or situations that elicits negative feelings or high levels of stress (e.g. fear of the toilets; the noise in the playground; lots of people moving all together in the corridors and between classes, tests/ exams)
- To escape difficult social situations (e.g. feeling left out at playtime; reading out loud in class or other public speaking/group task; working as part of a group)
- To get attention from or spend more time with significant others (e.g. change in family dynamic, concerned about the wellbeing of parent).
- To spend more time out of school as it is more fun or stimulating (go shopping, play computer games, hang out with friends).
- Are there any maintaining factors?

It is essential that different perspectives are respected, especially those of the child or young person. When there is a difference in the understanding of the problem, a focus on how the behaviour is occurring (what is maintaining the behaviour) rather than why should be adopted.

Action Planning

After the information gathering and analysis process has occurred a return to school or **support plan should be made**. All plans need to be **co-produced** with parents, the child or young person and any other appropriate agencies, using a Person Centred Planning approach. All parties need to be on board.

Each plan will be different according to the actions indicated by the assessment; **what worked with one child will not necessarily work with another**. The plans should always be realistic and achievable with the aim of reintegrating the child or young person. An overly ambitious plan is likely to fail. The return should be **gradual and graded** and recognised by all that a 'quick fix' is not always possible. A part-time timetable may be necessary as part of this process, but this should always be temporary and not seen as a long-term option as all children are entitled to full-time education.

All parties should be aware that there may be difficulties implementing the plan and these should be anticipated, and solutions found. An **optimistic approach** should be taken, if the child fails to attend school on one day, **start again the next day**. Parents and school should anticipate that there is likely to be more difficulty after a school holiday, period of illness or after the weekend.

At the start of the plan the child is likely to show more distress, and **school staff and parents need to work together** to agree a **firm and consistent approach**. Any concerns about the process should not be shared with the child as the plan may take some time before any changes are seen and a **'united front'** is recommended. Any concerns should be communicated away from the child. Schools should take an **individual and flexible approach** to the young person's needs. All school staff that will come into contact

with the young person should be aware of the return to school plan as well as any adaptations to normal routines or expectations that are in place to support the child.

Once actions on a support plan are agreed with a young person, e.g. returning to school in very finely graded steps, **stick to what has been agreed for that week**, even if things seem to be going really well, as pushing things further than agreed can heighten anxiety, reduce trust and backfire overall.

The format of the support plan should be flexible. **If appropriate a young person's version should be created.** Examples of a support plan can be found in [Appendix 3 Example support plans](#).

Literature has identified key elements of support that should be in place in order for a reintegration action plan to be successful.

Key elements of any plan

- Direct telephone contact between parent/carers and key workers in school. Agree expectations regarding frequency of contact and set realistic response times.
- A return to school at the earliest opportunity.
- Early home visits if appropriate to discuss the young person's reluctance to attend school.
- All parties to agree to actions and keep to them until the next review period.
- A personalised programme for each young person. (e.g. flexible timetable, arrangements for transport, buddying, and provision of a safe haven).
- Ensuring the young person has access to an identified member of staff who can be approached if anxiety becomes temporarily overwhelming in school (i.e. a key worker).
- Ensuring all staff (including supply staff) are informed about the young person's difficulties, particularly during changes of classes/key stages.
- Identifying a safe place or base in school that the young person can go to if needed
- Identifying a member of staff for the young person to 'check in' with throughout the day
- Considering whether or not a family assessment such as an Early Help Plan would be helpful to identify whole family support

Review

It is essential that any plan is regularly reviewed. There should be set dates for reviewing how any support plan is progressing and key personnel to attend identified. It is essential that the young people and parents are actively involved in the review.

The review should identify and celebrate any progress made, review whether further information has come to light to help inform clear next steps. These next steps can include:

- consolidating and maintaining the current support plan;
- setting new outcomes and or actions for the young person, school and parents;
- Identifying that further consultation with other agencies needs to occur which may, if necessary, lead to a referral to other service e.g. Educational Psychology, CAMHS, Occupational Therapy

EBSNA and Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC)

It is well documented that anxiety and poor stress management are common in children with autism and that anxiety may worsen during adolescence, as young people face increasingly complex social interactions and often become more aware of their differences and interpersonal difficulties. As yet, there is little research into the prevalence of those with ASC and EBSNA, but evidence and experience suggest that due to the anxieties that the children with ASC experience they are at increased risk of EBSNA.

The factors which influence levels of anxiety in those with ASC, as with any child, are multiple and often complex; associated with context blindness, executive functioning, limited theory of mind, difficulties processing language, focus on detail, sensory processing differences (Ozsivadjian & Knott, 2016; Gaus, 2011; McLeod et al., 2015; Ting & Weiss, 2017). Recent research also considers intolerance of uncertainty as a key contributing factor to anxiety in children with ASC.



Schools will be aware that there are complex social environments that children with autism can find exhausting; they are spending cognitive energy managing this social experience and can become overloaded. Indeed, their anxiety may become overwhelming and place them at risk of EBSNA.

Given the increased risk of a child with ASC experiencing high levels of anxiety that may lead to EBSNA, it is essential that there is early attention and intervention given to developing the child's social skills, emotional literacy, resilience and their ability to self-regulate.

Please see The Autism Education Trust document entitled:

'School Stress and Anxiety: how it can lead to school refusal and impact on family life'

for further information (<https://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/shop/exclusions-resources/>).

Supporting students

A systematic review of psychosocial interventions for school refusal with primary and secondary school students (Maynard et al., 2015) concluded:

- There were relatively few rigorous studies of interventions for school refusal;
- The current evidence provides tentative support for Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) in the treatment of school refusal, but there is an overall lack of sufficient evidence to draw firm conclusions of the efficacy of CBT as the treatment of choice for school refusal.

Graded exposure is an important CBT tool particularly for those suffering from anxiety. This approach should ideally be worked through with a qualified CBT therapist, however if this not a viable option, exposure may also be undertaken with a trusted member of school staff. The BBC have produced a guide to graded exposure, available at http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/headroom/cbt/graded_exposure.pdf

Ideas for supporting students can be found at <https://www.babcockldp.co.uk/inclusion-and-ehwb/anxiety-based-school-avoidance/support-for-students>

References and Resources

References

- Babcock, LDP. (2016). *Developing effective support systems for young people experiencing anxiety based school avoidance*. Retrieved from: <https://www.babcockldp.co.uk/inclusion-and-ehwb/anxiety-based-school-avoidance>
- BBC. (undated). - Graded exposure [Virtual leaflet]. Retrieved from: http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/headroom/cbt/graded_exposure.pdf
- Beck, A. T., & Emery, G. (1985). *Anxiety disorders and phobias: A cognitive perspective*. New York: Basic Books.
- Berg, I., Nichols, K., & Pritchard, C. (1969). School phobia: Its classification and relationship to dependency. *Child Psychology & Psychiatry & Allied Disciplines*, 10(2), 123–141. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-7610.1969.tb02074.x>
- Bernstein, G. A., Warren, S. L., Massie, E. D., & Thuras, P. D. (1999). Family dimensions in anxious–depressed school refusers. *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*, 13(5), 513–528.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1992). *Ecological systems theory*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Cambridgeshire County Council. (2020). *Emotionally based school refusal: a guide for primary and secondary schools*. Retrieved from: <https://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/asset-library/Emotionally-based-school-refusal-guidance.pdf>
- Department for Education. (2010). *Children, Schools and Families Act*. Norwich: HMSO.
- Department for Education. (1996). *Education Act*. London, UK: HMSO.
- Derbyshire County Council. (2018). *Emotionally based school refusal, a guide for primary and secondary schools*. Retrieved from: https://schoolrefuserfamilies.files.wordpress.com/2018/01/derbyshire-eps-emotionally-based-schoolrefusal-guide_tcm44-233526.pdf
- Egger, H. L., Costello, J. E., & Angold, A. (2003). School refusal and psychiatric disorders: A community study. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 42(7), 797–807.
- Elliott, J. G. (1999). Practitioner review: School refusal: Issues of conceptualisation, assessment, and treatment. *The Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry and Allied Disciplines*, 40(7), 1001–1012.
- Flakierska-Praquin, N., Lindström, M., & Gillberg, C. (1997). School phobia with separation anxiety disorder: A comparative 20-to 29-year follow-up study of 35 school refusers. *Comprehensive Psychiatry*, 38(1), 17–22.
- Fremont, W. P. (2003). School refusal in children and adolescents. *American family physician*, 68(8), 1555–1560.
- Gaus, V.L. (2011). Cognitive behavioural therapy for adults with autism spectrum disorder, *Advances in Mental Health and Intellectual Disabilities*, 5(5), 15–25.

- Heyne, D., & Rollings, S. (2002). *School refusal*. Oxford: Blackwell Scientific Publications.
- Kearney, C. A. (2008). School absenteeism and school refusal behavior in youth: A contemporary review. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 28(3), 451-471.
- Kearney, C. A., & Silverman, W. K. (1990). A preliminary analysis of a functional model of assessment and treatment for school refusal behavior. *Behavior Modification*, 14(3), 340-366.
- King, N. J., & Bernstein, G. A. (2001). School refusal in children and adolescents: A review of the past 10 years. *Journal of the American academy of child & adolescent psychiatry*, 40(2), 197-205.
- Lauchlan, F. (2003). Responding to chronic non-attendance: A review of intervention approaches. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 19(2), 133-146.
- Maynard, B. R., Brendel, K. E., Bulanda, J. J., Heyne, D., Thompson, A. M., & Pigott, T. D. (2015). Psychosocial interventions for school refusal with primary and secondary school students: A systematic review. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 11(1), 1-76.
- McLeod, B.D., Wood, J.J., & Klebanoff, S. (2015). Advances in evidence-based intervention and assessment practices for youth with an autism spectrum disorder. *Behavior Therapy*, 46, 1-6.
- NCB. (2016). A whole school framework for emotional well-being and mental health. Retrieved from: https://www.ncb.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/Policy_docs/Briefings/NCB%20School%20Well%20Being%20Framework%20Leaders%20Tool%20FINAL.pdf
- The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills. (2019). *Education inspection framework (EIF)*. Manchester: Ofsted.
- Ozsivadjian, A., & Knott, F. (2016). Anxiety problems in young people with autism spectrum disorder: a case series. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 16(2), 203-14.
- Pellegrini, D. W. (2007). School non-attendance: Definitions, meanings, responses, interventions. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 23(1), 63-77.
- Seligman, M. (2002). *Authentic happiness*. New York: Free Press.
- Sheppard, A. (2011). The non-sense of raising school attendance. *Emotional and behavioural difficulties*, 16(3), 239-247.
- Taylor, C. (2012). *Improving attendance at school*. London, UK: Department for Education.
- Thambirajah, M.S., Grandison, K.J., & De-Hayes, L. (2008). *Understanding School refusal: a handbook for professionals in education, Health and Social Care*. London, UK: Jessica Kingsley.
- Ting, V., & Weiss, J.A. (2017). Emotion Regulation and Parent Co-Regulation in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 47(3), 680-689.

West Sussex County Council. (2018). *Emotionally based school avoidance guidance*. Retrieved from:
<http://schools.westsussex.gov.uk/Page/10483>

Anxiety Management

- **Starving the Anxiety Gremlin: A Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Workbook on Anxiety Management for Young People** by Kate Collins-Donnelly
- **What to Do When You Worry Too Much: A Kid's Guide to Overcoming Anxiety** by Dawn Heubner
- **Young Minds** – information about anxiety <https://youngminds.org.uk/search-results/?terms=information+about+anxiety>
- **Mighty Moe** by Lacey Woloshyn, a work book for children aged 5 -11.
<http://www.cw.bc.ca/library/pdf/pamphlets/Mighty%20Moe1.pdf>
- Worksheets for anxiety – Anxiety Canada website. <https://www.anxietycanada.com/free-downloadable-pdf-resources/>
- **Anxiety self help guide** – Mood Juice
https://www.mcgill.ca/counselling/files/counselling/anxiety_moodjuice_self_help_guide.pdf
- **Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Skills Training Workbook** – Hertfordshire Partnership NHS
<http://inabook.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/CBT-workbook-good-to-use.pdf>
- **Anxiety** by Paul Stallard -Examples of activities <http://tandfbis.s3.amazonaws.com/rt-media/pp/resources/CBTCHILD/worksheets.pdf>
- **The Anxious Child:** A booklet for parents and carers wanting to know more about anxiety in children and young people. <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/anxious-child>
- **Overcoming your child's fears and worries:** a self help guide using cognitive behavioural techniques by Cathy Cresswell and Luch Willetts
- **Mindfulness in the classroom: 100 ideas for primary teachers** by Tammie Prince - a book containing many simple, practical mindfulness activities for use in the primary classroom.
- **Mindfulness for teen anxiety by Christopher Willard** is part of a series of workbooks containing accessible mindfulness activities for secondary pupils

General Emotional Wellbeing & Mental Health Literature

- **Managing Your Mind: The Mental Fitness Guide** by Gillian Butler and Tony Hope (for older young people)
- **Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life for Teens** by Joseph V. Ciarrochi , Louise Hayes and Ann Bailey.
- **Stuff That Sucks: Accepting what you can't change and committing to what you can** By Ben Sedley
- **Promoting Emotional Resilience** – Toolkit <http://hbtg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/KAN-Emotional-resilience-toolkit.pdf>
- **The Thriving Adolescent: Using Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and Positive Psychology to Help Teens Manage Emotions, Achieve Goals, and Build Connection** by Louise Hayes
- **Parent survival guide** <https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/parents-survival-guide/>
- **Dealing with Feeling** by Tina Rae. Published by Lucky Duck
- **I am special** by Peter Vermeulon. Jessica Kingsley Publishers
- **A Volcano in My Tummy** by Elaine Whitehouse and Warwick Pudney.
- **Emotional Literacy assessment and intervention** by Southampton Psychology Service. Published by GL Assessment Limited. (Available for both Primary and Secondary)

- **Online course on how to support young people with mental health difficulties** www.minded.org.uk
- **MindEd for families** : MindEd for Families has online advice and information from trusted sources and will help you to understand and identify early issues and best support your child. <https://www.minded.org.uk/families/index.html#/>
- **MindEd for professionals**: MindEd has e-learning applicable across the health, social care, education, criminal justice and community settings. It is aimed at anyone from beginner through to specialist. <https://www.minded.org.uk/Catalogue/TileView>

Books for young children

- **The Goodnight Caterpillar: A Relaxation Story for Kids** by Lori Lite
- **Huge bag of worries** by Virginia Ironside
- **The Koala that could** by Rachel Bright
- **Silly Billy** by Anthony Browne
- **Willy the Wimp** by Anthony Browne
- **Owl Babies** by Martin Wadell
- **How to catch a star** by Oliver Jeffers
- **Willy and the Wobbly house** by Margot Sunderland
- **The boy and the bear** by Lori Lite
- **Starting school** by Janet Ahlberg
- **Back to school tortoise** by Lucy M. George
- **Gotcha Smile** by Rita Philips Mitchell
- **Halibut Jackson** by David Lucas
- **Giraffes can't dance** by Giles Andreae
- **Parenting through Stories: Please Stay Here- I want you near** by Dr Sarah Mundy

Appendix 1 Profile of Risk of EBSNA

The schedule consists of five key areas, each of which contain a number of items you are asked to consider in terms of their possible importance in influencing an emotionally based attendance problem. When completing the schedule, it is important to be as objective as possible, and to base assessments on evidence. Thus, it is recommended that completion of the schedule is a joint venture, wherein checking and questioning can lead to the best judgements in terms of item importance.

	Level of concern				
Loss and Change	High	Med	Low	Not an issue	Not known
Death of parent, relative, friend					
Sudden traumatic event					
Sudden separation from a parent					
Moving to a new house, school, area					
Loss of a classmate					
Parent, relative, friend illness					
Note on key items					
Family Dynamic	High	Med	Low	Not an issue	Not known
Inappropriate parenting					
Birth of new child					
Parental separation					
Parents arguing/ fighting					
Practical problems bringing child to school					
Problems with parental guardianship					
Jealous of sibling at home					
Note on key items					

Curriculum/Learning issues	High	Med	Low	Not an issue	Not known
Low levels of literacy					
English as a second/ additional language					
PE/ games issues					
General learning difficulties					
Specific subject difficulties					
Exam or test anxiety					
Problems keeping up with schoolwork					
Note on key issues					
Social and Personal	High	Med	Low	Not an issue	Not known
Being bullied					
Difficulty making/ keeping friends					
Seems to have few friends					
Difficulties with a particular teacher/ staff member					
Dislikes break/ play times					
Few leisure interests					
Medical condition					
Note on Key items					
Psychological Wellbeing	High	Med	Low	Not an issue	Not known
Often seems tired					
Low self esteem					
Appears sad/ depressed					



Appears anxious					
Keeping feelings to themselves					
Has a negative outlook on life/self					
Note on key items					
Other issues	High	Med	Low	Not an issue	Not known
Note on key items					

Appendix 2 Information gathering and assessment

Name		School	
Year Group		Key member of staff	
Other agencies involves			
Description of behaviour			
Risk factors school, child and family			
Strengths and protective factors			
Formulation and integration of various factors			

Appendix 3 Example support plan

Support Plan	
Name:	Date:
At school these things can make me feel upset:	
	
My key adult(s) in school is/are:	
When I can speak to _____:	
Where I can speak to _____:	
Until _____ my return to school plan includes the following changes to my attendance: (Identify any changes to days or times they come in)	
	
Changes to my timetable include (Identify any changes needed and what should happen/ where they should go instead)	
	
Any other changes include: Identify any other changes to routine (break, lunch time, changes between lessons etc.) classroom expectation (not expected to read aloud, work in pairs etc.) or homework	
	
When I start to get upset, I notice these things about myself:	
	

When I start to get upset, others notice these things about me:



Things I can do to make myself feel better when I'm at school:



Things that other people (staff and friends) can do to help me feel better when I'm at school:



Things that my family can do to help me go to school



Places in the school I can go to where I feel safe and supported:



This plan will be reviewed regularly so that it remains helpful to me.

Review date:

My signature

Key adult's signature

Parent/carer signature

Other people who have access to this plan are:

Support Plan

Name:

Date:

At school these things can make me feel upset:

My key adult(s) in school is/are:

Details of checking in with my school support person (When, where)

When I can speak to _____:

Where I can speak to _____:

Until _____ my return to school plan includes the following changes to my attendance:

(Identify any changes to days or times they come in)

Changes to my timetable include

(Identify any changes needed and what should happen/ where they should go instead)

Any other changes include:

Identify any other changes to routine (break, lunch time, changes between lessons etc.)
classroom expectation (not expected to read aloud, work in pairs etc.) or homework

When I start to get upset, I notice these things about myself:

When I start to get upset, others notice these things about me:

Things I can do to make myself feel better when I'm at school:

Things that other people (staff and friends) can do to help me feel better when I'm at school:

Things that my family can do to help me go to school

Places in the school I can go to where I feel safe and supported:

This plan will be reviewed regularly so that it remains helpful to me.

Review date:

My signature

Key adult's signature

Parent/carer signature

Other people who have access to this plan are: