

Maintaining Connections

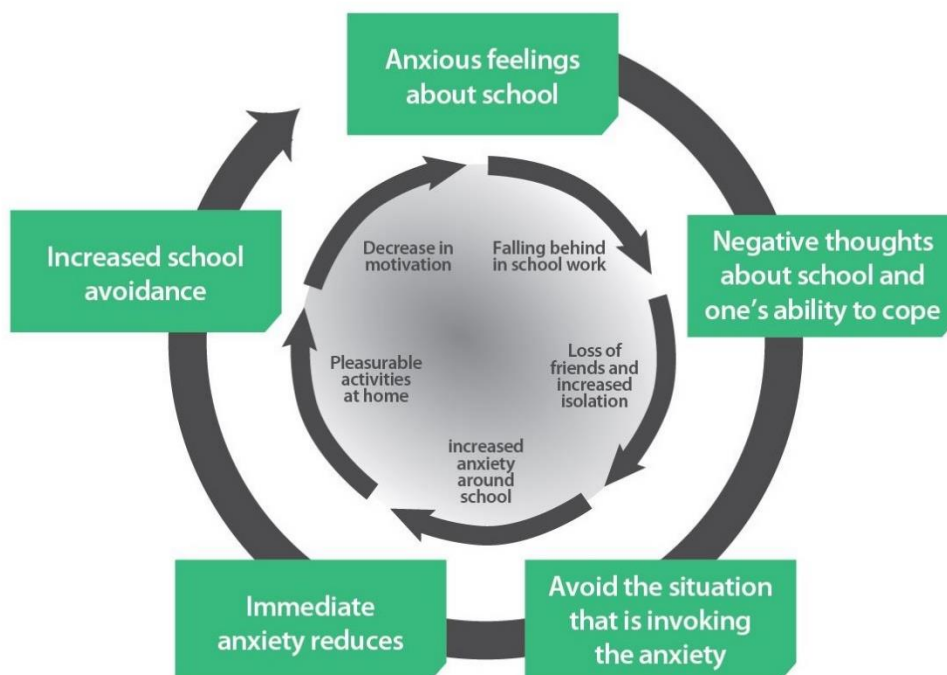
When a child or young person (CYP) is not consistently attending school, it can be difficult to implement support or to build relationships. School staff and professionals often feel limited in what they can offer in terms of support or how to approach these situations.

Equally, time spent away from school can impact the CYP's (and family's) sense of belonging, with staff, peers and the wider school community. This can leave them feeling disconnected from their peers, learning and from school staff.

This guidance aims to provide an overview of how schools and professionals can maintain connections with CYP who are not consistently attending school and ultimately improve their relationships and sense of belonging.

Sense of belonging: the psychological feeling of connectedness to a social, cultural or professional group/community.

Factors that promote belonging include: shared beliefs/ values/ interests , a supportive environment, opportunities for interaction, common goals and self-esteem.



Regardless of the initial anxiety-provoking factors that may have led to non-attendance or avoidance, a lack of relationships or a 'sense of belonging' is likely to lead to this becoming entrenched and makes it more challenging for the CYP to return to school over time. Support that aims to improve CYP's sense of belonging or feeling of inclusion and value within the school community, may therefore be needed.

Building and Maintaining Relationships

Research (e.g. Sawyer, 2022; Higgins, 2022) highlights the importance of a relationship-based approach when supporting EBSA, with CYP and families needing to feel supported and listened to. A lack of relationships can lead to a reduced sense of belonging, and impacts **feelings of safety**.

Suggestions/ things to consider when building relationships with CYP/ families experiencing EBSA:

- Ensure that a key person(s) has been identified in collaboration with the CYP and family. This person should form a consistent point of contact with both parents and CYP and be a person that knows the child outside of the classroom.
- Implementing timetabled regular check ins with the CYP to ensure that they have access to a trusted adult when needed. **If not attending**, consider holding these check ins virtually or via telephone to maintain connections remotely. *(Consider the support implemented to maintain connections during the Covid-19 pandemic).*
- Consistency is important. Ensure that, where possible, the times or adults involved in the check in do not change unless necessary. It may take multiple attempts to engage the CYP remotely, however over time they may feel able to do so once feelings of safety improve.
- Lead with the CYP's interests and aim to **gather their voice**. When building relationships, avoid talking about schoolwork or anxiety-provoking topics. Using visual methods, games and 'getting to know you' activities are useful starting points. *(If you have a trained ELSA within school, they may be able to provide some advice/support with this).*
- You may wish to begin building relationships through the child's family, through regular phone calls with parents, sending activities/ messages home and **supporting the parents to gather their child's voice**.
- Ensure that messages continue to be sent home from multiple members of staff (e.g. 'we missed you today') to maintain feelings of value and connection despite non-attendance.
- Does your school have an ELSA? They may have ideas, resources or skills that could be useful in promoting relationships either in school or remotely! See more information **here**.

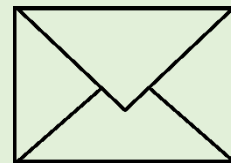


Maintaining connections with peers/ the school community

Positive friendships and peer relationships can act as a protective factor when promoting school attendance due to the feelings of inclusion and support that this promotes. Ensuring that the CYP continues to have connections with peers, including both pre-existing and new friendship groups, is therefore helpful.

Suggestions/things to consider:

- If the CYP has a pre-existing friendship group, consider whether they are able to interact with them despite not attending. Can a group virtual meeting/ group project be set up? Could the CYP come into school for breaks and lunchtimes/ social clubs? **This should be discussed in collaboration with the CYP and parents.**
- If peer conflict/ bullying is a factor contributing to the child's non-attendance, consider how this could be prevented/reduced whilst gathering the child's voice to increase feelings of safety within school.
- Upon transition to new settings, setting up a buddy or mentoring system could be useful to promote positive interactions and feelings of community.
- **If the child is not attending**, ensuring that messages from peers are sent home to allow them to feel included.
- Update the CYP and family around key events in the school community (e.g. performances/ non-uniform days/ charity events/ assemblies/ staff changes) to allow them to feel part of the school community.



Maintaining connection with learning and the classroom

Learning may be a contributing factor to the CYP's anxiety, which may be a result of an unmet special educational need. In this case, this should be identified and addressed through **referrals to appropriate services**.

However, if this is not the case, **learning may become a maintaining factor over time**, with missed time in the classroom leading to gaps in learning which may, in itself, be anxiety-provoking. This may make it harder to return to the classroom regardless of the initial **reasons behind non-attendance**.

Ensuring that the CYP has opportunities to keep up with learning and does not miss too much content from the classroom, is important (but only if they feel able to do so!). Gathering the child and parent voice around the best way to achieve this is important.

Suggestions/ things to consider when ensuring continued connection with learning:

- Consider sending work/ recorded lessons/ activities home **if the CYP is not consistently attending**. If so, ensure that instructions are clearly explained, materials are accessible and pitched at the right level for the child.

- **Ensure to consider the support required by the child to access learning;** do they need support from a parent? Does the parent have their own needs/ circumstances that might prevent them from providing this?
- Teachers should ensure that they are available to send work home via email, and check in with the CYP/parents to ensure that this is clear and not overwhelming. Offering virtual catch ups to allow opportunities to ask questions or share feedback may be helpful.
- Can the CYP join lessons or group projects remotely? Ensure that they have opportunities to ask questions via email, or to present/share work outside of lesson time to reduce anxiety.

Also see:

[Suffolk Mainstream Inclusion Framework](#)

[Suffolk InfoLink | Alternative Tuition Service](#)

<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/guidance-reports/send>

[Going back to school | Childline](#)