

Guidance for ELSAs: Supporting attendance difficulties and emotionally-based school avoidance (EBSA)

This guidance aims to support ELSAs who are currently working with children and young people (CYP) who may be experiencing attendance difficulties. There may be a range of reasons for this, including medical and/or mental health difficulties, however it is hoped that this document will provide ideas, advice and guidance for how ELSA support may continue during this time.



What is emotionally-based school avoidance (EBSA)?

EBSA stands for Emotionally Based School Avoidance. It is a term used in reference to a group of children and young people who have **difficulty in attending school** due to **emotional factors**, sometimes resulting in prolonged absences from school.

School avoidance can be seen as a form of **coping strategy**, a behaviour seen in pupils who, for whatever reason, are finding being in school difficult. The non-attendance may be conscious and planned, or it may be an **instinctive response to a sense of threat** (different presentations of EBSA could be viewed as either reflecting fight, flight or freeze patterns of behaviour).

For some, an **avoidant strategy** might be used to miss particular lessons, whilst others might resist attending altogether.

'Attendance resistance' can arise quite suddenly in response to a significant event, or it can be more insipid, developing slowly over time.

In addition to "EBSA", occasionally the term "Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA)" is also used and there are several other variations. The phrase **"School Refusal"** was used more often in the past but has largely fallen out of favour because for many it implies the child is 'refusing' school from a position of authority and strength, whereas for the majority it is often from a position of fear or some kind of emotional overwhelm.

Whilst there may sometimes be one main underlying cause for a CYP experiencing EBSA, there are more likely to be several interacting factors. One way of understanding the possible contributory factors for school avoidance can be to see them as 'push' or 'pull' influences (see below).

It is also important to consider that a CYP's experience may be linked to a complex interplay between school, home and within-child factors when planning support.

Further information regarding EBSA, its contributing factors and how to support CYP experiencing this can be found within [Psychology and Therapeutic Service's EBSA Resources](#).

PUSH FACTORS

I don't want to go to school because being in school makes me feel bad in some way...

I want to 'push' school away or I feel 'pushed' from school because it leaves me feeling...

Ashamed
Incompetent
Unwelcomed / Not wanted
Lonely
Unwell / Panicky / Anxious
Misunderstood
Unsafe

PULL FACTORS

I don't want to go to school because not being in school is somehow going to be better for me...

I feel 'pulled' towards home or I feel 'pulled' away from school because...

I will get more time with my parent/ carer
I will be able to make sure people at home are okay
I feel I learn better at home
I need to look after my wellbeing and school undermines my wellbeing
My friend is missing school tomorrow, so I want to as well
Home is where I feel safe

'WITHIN FAMILY'

Familial health concerns?
Any negative wider family experiences of school?
Any challenges within morning routine?

'WITHIN-CHILD'

Sensory sensitivities?
Social skills challenges?
Emotional literacy difficulties?
Executive functioning challenges?
Health concerns?

'WITHIN SCHOOL'

Any difficulty identifying/meeting CYP's learning needs?
CYP experiencing bullying or social isolation?
Any tricky relationships with school staff?
Any difficulties with particular school procedures or lessons?

Tailoring your approach to each child:

Research suggests that support for EBSA should be tailored to the individual person and circumstances, and therefore there is no 'one size fits all approach'. This may feel familiar to you within your ELSA role, as you are likely used to supporting a range of difficulties using varied tools and approaches.

This guidance aims to provide you with some ideas and approaches that you may wish to refer to when supporting CYP experiencing EBSA or attendance difficulties. It is likely that you may already use these when supporting CYP experiencing anxiety or difficult home situations within your current practice. In most cases, your usual referrals procedure should apply, and these difficulties can be supported within a typical 'ELSA Session'.

In some cases, however, situations or difficulties may be more complex. At these times, you may not feel that the CYP is able to access 'ELSA sessions', however your skills in communicating and working with CYP, and training and experience as an ELSA may prove helpful in gathering the child's voice, or creating action plans to support their attendance. In these instances, you may need to carefully contract your role with your line manager and the CYP's family, to ensure that all understand the expectations of your involvement.

When asked to support a child with their school-based anxiety and/or attendance, ensure that you discuss their needs with an adult who knows them well, and ensure that your line manager and the school SENCO are aware of the aims and nature of your involvement.

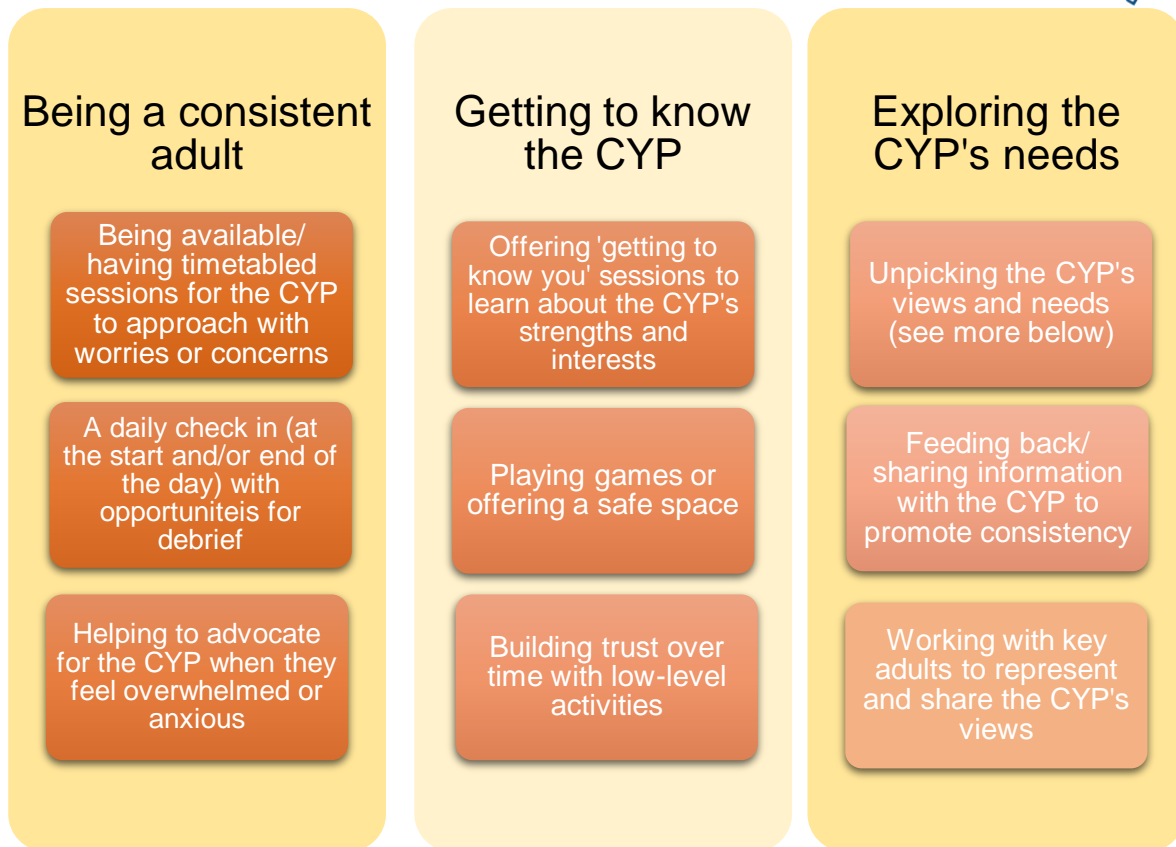
Building Relationships

Research suggests the importance of a relationship-based approach when supporting EBSA. This is also described within the [Suffolk EBSA Resources](#).

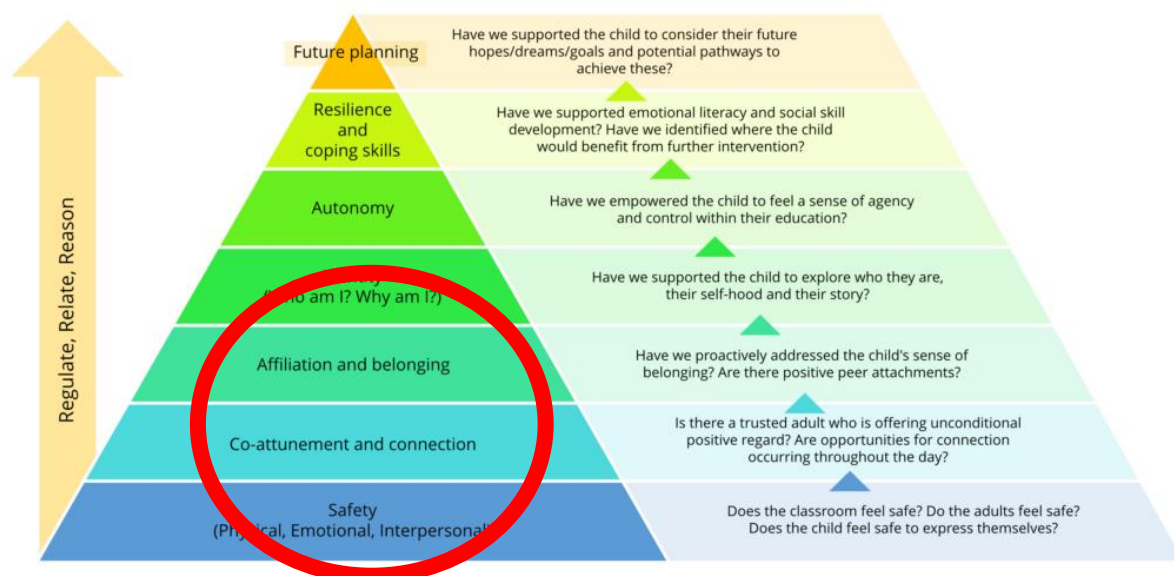
This is a key component on the ELSA role and skillset, and therefore your line manager may suggest that you are well-placed to form a relationship with the CYP as an adult outside of the classroom.

Some possible activities are included in the graphic below.

Remember: ELSA is designed to be a short-term, targeted intervention, and so these relationship-building activities may need to take place prior to or instead of typical ELSA sessions. Always discuss your role, expectations, and any targets (if appropriate) with your line manager.



Although developed to understand and support CYP who have experienced trauma, the Applied Trauma Response Classroom Model can be useful to inform and pitch support for CYP who feel anxious or unsafe in school.



ELSAs and line managers may also find it useful to refer to the 'Feelings of Safety' guidance within the Suffolk EBSA Resources to inform support and building of relationships in school.

Gathering Pupil Voice

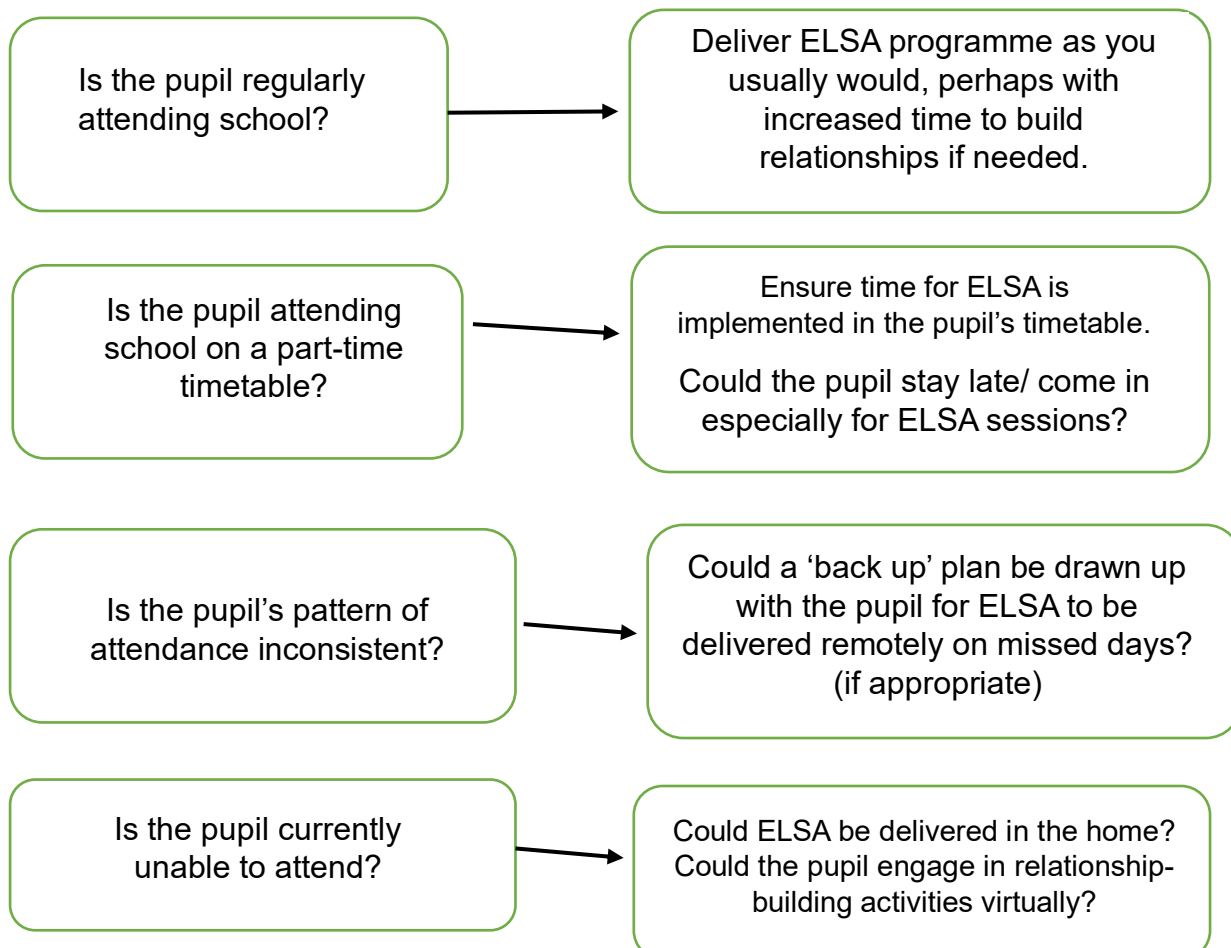
When supporting CYP experiencing attendance difficulties, you may be asked to support school staff to gather the child's voice and/or views. Research has suggested that this is vital in developing effective support plans alongside the CYP and their family, and your skills as an ELSA mean that you may be well placed to do this.

This does not mean that you are developing or implementing support plans, and this should be done with direction and support from your line managers and/or the school SENCO. However, your skills as an ELSA and the positive relationships that you build with CYP means that you may be a good advocate for CYP and their families, and so you may be invited to represent/share the child's voice during the planning process, or in meetings around their school attendance.

To support you with this, some useful tools and approaches are linked at the end of this document. Some of these are likely to already be familiar to you, although please be mindful that different CYP and needs may require a different approach. Please also see the Suffolk EBSA Resources for more advice and guidance on gathering CYP views.

ELSAs supporting pupils who are not consistently in school:

Depending on the presenting needs and extent of the CYP's difficulties, sometimes ELSAs may be asked to support a pupil who is not currently in school, for whatever reason. This may include typical ELSA sessions or support of a different nature, such as informal check ins or 'relationship building' sessions.



The Suffolk EBSA Resources contain guidance for maintaining connections with a pupil whilst they are out of school. Remember, it is not your role as an ELSA to create, implement or review attendance action plans, but your skills for gaining the pupil's voice and trust can be beneficial in supporting this process.

You should not be:

- ✗ Making decisions around part-time timetables.
- ✗ Completing 'ELSA' sessions without a clear target and focus.
- ✗ Supporting complex mental health or SEND needs without appropriate training and supervision.
- ✗ Advising families on diagnosis, action plans or school attendance.

ELSAs Working Remotely: Key things to consider

It may be decided that completing ELSA sessions within the family home, or holding 'getting to know you sessions' virtually may be beneficial to the pupil due to difficulties with attendance. Please note that you should always seek guidance from your line manager and senior leadership team before offering these to families to ensure that you are adhering to policies within your setting.

Top tips:

- **Have a clear plan and focus.** Ensure that this is communicated to the family and your line manager and records are kept of each session.
- **Explain to the pupil and their family the purpose of these sessions** (e.g. to carry on with support implemented whilst in school/ to get to know you/ to understand your worries) **and what to expect** (timings, how they can communicate, plans for if technology fails).
- **Use visual resources** (both within the home and via the screen). These reduce the pupil's need to respond verbally and makes it easier for them to engage if they are anxious/ overwhelmed.
- It may be helpful to **send resources/ session plans home** for the pupil to look at ahead of sessions to provide a point of reference.
- **Persevere and be consistent.** It may take time for a CYP to feel comfortable communicating virtually, or engaging in the family home, especially if you do not have a pre-existing relationship. To build a sense of safety, ensure that you consistently turn up for your agreed sessions, even if the CYP chooses not to. With time, they may feel able to engage.

If you decide to offer remote and/or virtual sessions, please ensure that you and your line manager have considered the following:

Consent

- Have you gained informed consent from the child to work virtually?



- Do you remind the CYP within sessions regarding their choice to continue and if the sessions are still something they are happy participating in?
- Have you ensured the CYP understands the process of working virtually (e.g., accessing the video platform, screen sharing etc) and can meaningfully engage with it?

Confidentiality and Safeguarding

- Have you established clear expectations with the young person and their family regarding who can be in the room during your sessions?
- Is there a space within your setting where you can hold virtual sessions uninterrupted?
- Have you discussed with your line manager how you will maintain effective safeguarding procedures to protect both the CYP and yourself? Have you explained to the CYP that if you have concerns about them that they may need to be shared? Remember never to promise complete confidentiality and hold in mind that virtual working may reveal risks that were previously unknown (e.g., living conditions, behaviour of other family members).

Safety and Containment

- Have you reassured the CYP regarding the safety of information shared and about seeing themselves on screen?
- Are you seeking regular feedback from the CYP during sessions to gauge whether they are comfortable with this virtual method of working with you?
- Do you have an agreement with the CYP about what will happen if they become distressed or wish to end the session, or if either of you have technical difficulties?

Engagement

- Does the young person seem comfortable with the idea of virtual sessions? Would an initial conversation or session over the phone be helpful to encourage their engagement?
- If video working is not consistently possible or desirable for the CYP or their family, how will you keep in touch?
- Have you considered any additional needs the CYP may have (e.g., neurodevelopmental differences, sensory processing difficulties, learning difficulties) which could impact on how they can engage virtually?
- Have you kept in mind that the CYP may experience increased distractions or demands on their attention when doing a session virtually?

Remember!

- ✓ If in doubt regarding working virtually you can discuss this with your **Line manager and/or your ELSA supervisor**
- ✓ Conversations regarding working virtually and/or in a CYP's home can be brought to your **EP supervision**

- ✓ You are **not** a therapist!

Supporting Parents

Research into the ELSA programme from a parental perspective indicates the key information they would like to have:

- ✓ A general overview of the ELSA programme and its wider aims and philosophy
- ✓ The reasons for the CYP's referral and how the ELSA programme hopes to be useful in promoting a specific aspect of their CYP's social and/or emotional development
- ✓ The time frame of the intervention and its outcomes, including any evaluation measures taken and what these mean.

Parents have further expressed the desire to have a form of regular contact whilst their CYP is receiving ELSA support so the skills developed can be positively reinforced at home. It is also important to consider that parents are very knowledgeable about their CYP and will often be able to provide valuable information on what is working for them and what further support may be needed.

How could this be achieved?

- Ensure that parents are kept up to date, any plans are made with them in advance and explain next steps clearly. This includes gathering their views, informing them about the EBSA resources and explaining your role.
- It may be helpful to attend meetings with parents to ensure a consistent point of contact, although please discuss this with your line manager. Ensure that this is with aim of representing CYP views or explaining support provided rather than providing emotional support to families.
- Sharing or holding parent information sessions or leaflets may be useful to allow them to read more and ask questions.

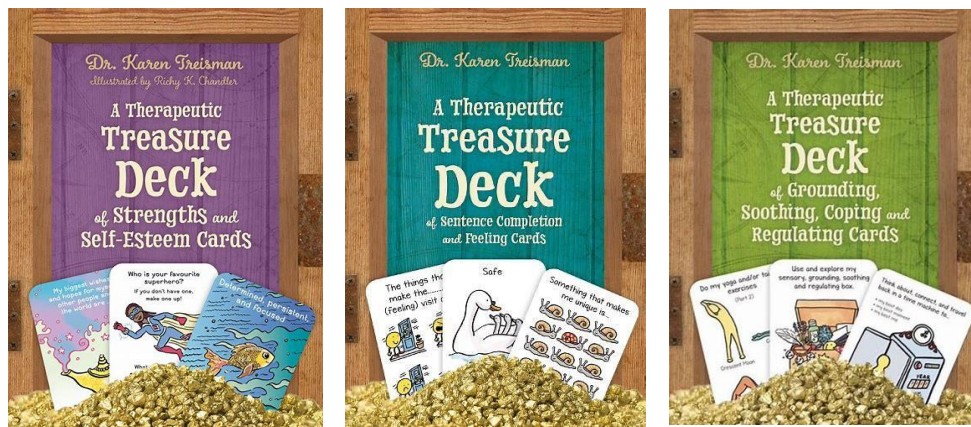
Research suggests that a good relationship and communication between home and school is crucial to promoting good attendance and reducing anxiety. In many cases, parents can often feel blamed or unsupported by schools. Implementing a consistent point of contact may help to overcome this.

Helpful Resources and Links

- [Suffolk EBSA Resources](#)
- ELSA Network: [Useful Resources – ELSA Network](#)
- ELSA Support: [EBSA Emotionally based school avoidance - ELSA Support \(elsa-support.co.uk\)](#) – link to ELSA resources specific to EBSA e.g., identifying difficulties, thoughts and feelings, thinking about the 'perfect school', coping with school worries.
- [School Wellbeing Risk and Resilience Card Set \(schoolwellbeingcards.co.uk\)](#)
Educational Psychologist Dr Jerricah Holder developed The School Wellbeing Card Set as a tool to gain insight into a CYP's views on their experience of

school. The 40-card set contains key risk factors regarding school avoidance and resilience factors which promote school attendance and wellbeing.

- Karen Treisman (Highly Specialist Clinical Psychologist) has developed several Therapeutic Treasure Decks which may be useful to draw from when planning sessions with CYP.



The following link offers explanations of each treasure deck, the topics and activities they cover: [Books, Toys, Cards, & Worksheets | Safe Hands Thinking Minds](#)

- Drawing the Ideal Safe School – this activity is a useful tool for determining a CYP's views on different aspects of school and their ideas regarding what they feel would help them to feel safer and more comfortable in this environment: [Ideal Safe School Complete 05.07.20 PDF.pdf - Google Drive](#)
- Suffolk County Council's Inclusion Facilitation service offers free resources which may be helpful to draw from: [Inclusion Facilitators Free Resources - Suffolk County Council](#)

Further Information around EBSA:

- Anna Freud: [Addressing emotionally-based school avoidance \(annafreud.org\)](#) – information document and webinar regarding explanations of EBSA, addressing this issue and supporting CYP.
- 'Understanding school refusal' – useful book resource by Thambirajah, Grandison & De-Hayes (2008).
- Tina Rae (Educational and Child Psychologist) useful book resource: Understanding & Supporting Children and Young People with Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA).
- Information around supporting parents and CYP experiencing EBSA: [Parent Views | EBSNA \(Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance\) \(edpsyched.co.uk\)](#)
- EBSA Horizons training for schools - [EdPsychEd | EBSA Horizons School Training](#)
- Useful book resource: The Invisible String by Patrice Karst