Guidance for education settings – Part 1: What can we do at a whole school level, to address 'EBSA'?

Attendance as a whole school concern

We want all pupils to feel that school is a 'safe and supportive' space: a place that even on a bad day still leaves them feeling valued, listened to, welcomed and able to cope, and on a good day leaves them feeling excited and inspired.

Schools should ideally be places that pupils would *choose* to go to because they know that no matter what else is going on in their life, and no matter what they feel when they wake up in the morning, they believe that going to school will benefit them in some way and is ultimately worth the effort. Essentially getting it 'right' at a whole school level is about finding ways to answer the question: *why should pupils continue coming into school no matter what else is going on in their lives*?

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"*Being in school is important to a child's achievement, wellbeing, and wider development. [Evidence](#) shows that the students with the highest attendance throughout their time in school gain the best GCSE and A Level results. Our research found that pupils who performed better both at the end of primary and [secondary school](#) missed fewer days than those who didn't perform as well. The data also shows that in 2019, [primary school](#) children in Key Stage 2 who didn't achieve the expected standard in reading, writing and maths missed on average four more days per school year than those whose performance exceeded the expected standard. Similarly, in the same year, secondary school pupils who didn't achieve grade 9 to 4 in English and maths missed on 10 more days on average over the key stage than those who achieved grade 9 to 5 in both English and maths*". Source: [Why is school attendance so important and what are the risks of missing a day? - The Education Hub (blog.gov.uk)](#)

- Why SHOULD children go to school?

  - How can we help children WANT to go to school?
  - Is there evidence to suggest that it is *nearly always* beneficial in the long term?

We need to have confident answers to these questions…

  - What would make children CHOOSE to go to THIS school? Why would they make the effort to come in even if they're worried, tired or fearful?
  - Why would parents make the effort to get their children into THIS school in the morning, no matter what else is going on in their lives at the time?

The whole school self-audit check-list
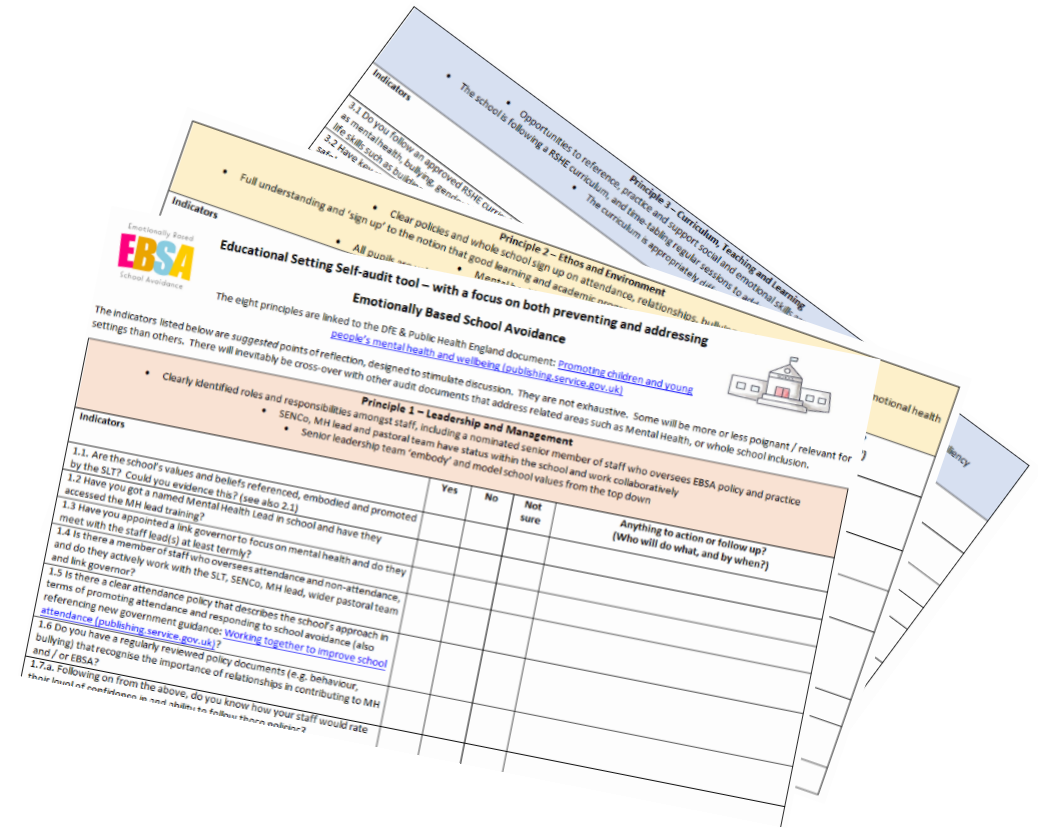
We have put together this document which we hope you may find helpful in discussing and addressing EBSA as a whole school: https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/asset-library/imported/School-Self-Audit-EBSA.docx

The document is aimed at aiding reflection on potential next steps for schools, organized under the 8 key principles for good whole school approaches outlined by Public Health England Promoting children and young people's mental health and wellbeing (publishing.service.gov.uk).

A summary of the key points from this is included in the slide that follows.

Capturing good universal practice that facilitates wellbeing

Leadership and management

Clearly identified roles and responsibilities amongst staff, including a nominated senior member of staff who oversees EBSA policy and practice

SENCo, MH lead and pastoral team have status within the school and work collaboratively

Senior leadership team 'embody' and model school values from the top down

School ethos

Clear policies and whole school sign up on attendance, relationships, bullying and transition

Full understanding and 'sign up' to the notion that good learning and academic progress are inseparable from / inextricably linked to good emotional health

Mental health is viewed as 'everyone's business'

All pupils are valued; with commitment to promoting inclusivity, a sense of community and belonging

Curriculum and teaching

Opportunities to reference, practice and support social and emotional skills are used across the wider curriculum

The school is following a RSHE curriculum, and time-tabling regular sessions to address specific learning objectives on topics such as resiliency

The curriculum is appropriately differentiated and accessible for all

Staff development and well-being

Staff wellbeing is valued in policy and practice

Emotional support and stress management is in place for staff, including staff supervision.

There are continuous professional development opportunities for all staff which makes clear the promotion of emotional/ mental health and wellbeing

Pupil voice

Opportunities for students to express their views and ideas, and have them heard are embedded within the culture of the school

Pupils are able to celebrate their individual achievements

Pupils are encouraged and enabled to be involved in decisions and plans about their support and provision

Early identification of difficulty

There are clear systems in place for the early identification of anxiety and potential for EBSA

There is a nominated member of staff who has responsibility to investigate and act on concerns

Partnership working

There is recognition of the importance of listening to and working with parents and carers, to develop mutual understanding and trust

There is open-ness to work with external agencies where appropriate

Information shared with parents, carers and pupils is accessible

An evidence informed graduated response to identified need

There is a provision map of school-based interventions & approaches available within an 'assess, plan, do, review' cycle

All staff are aware of strategies and programmes in place and of how to work with them to support pupils

Whole School Approach

In terms of developing a universal offer that looks to support good mental health and well-being at a whole school level, you might find the following helpful points of reference:

- NCB Resources for School Leaders A whole school framework for emotional well-being and mental health.

- Promoting and supporting mental health and wellbeing in schools and colleges - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk) describing what help you can get to develop whole school or college approaches to mental health and wellbeing.

- HT_briefing_layoutvFINALvii.pdf (publishing.service.gov.uk) Detailing the link between pupil health and wellbeing and attainment.

In addition, we have put together the following which we hope you may find helpful:

- **whole-school-approaches-to-mhwb-guidance (suffolk.gov.uk)** and **https://sway.office.com/Bqk4hD4SQxqzDFZe?ref=email** are two on-line documents that Suffolk Educational Psychologists produced to assist schools in reflecting on and developing whole school approaches.

- Our '**Keys to Inclusion**' pages may also be helpful in terms of advice and guidance on themes such as: the importance of welcome, the importance of teamwork, the importance of relationships and the importance of listening.

- Some easy to read 'top tips' for staff to keep in mind in terms of their general classroom practice are included in the 3 slides that follow (remember "Every interaction is an intervention": Dr. Karen Treisman).

Emotionally Based
EBSA
School Avoidance

Nurture positive relationships and recognise their importance.

Recognise and praise effort.

Actively look for strengths and contributions.

Create opportunities for everyone to meaningfully experience a sense of achievement.

Actively teach strategies to manage emotional discomfort (e.g. mindfulness).
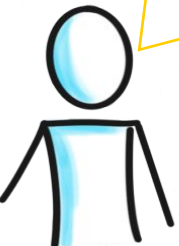
Make use of 'growth mindset' when speaking with pupils about challenges they face.

Top tips for schools to build resiliency

Make time for 'positive physical exercise experiences'.

Research has shown that the person most likely to be turned to when there are concerns around a pupil, is a favoured teacher

Be aware of how language and literacy difficulties can impact a pupil's access to the curriculum and how this can make them feel about school (and themselves). Seek support where necessary, and as early on as possible.

Recognise the importance of peer relationships to a pupil's sense of welcome and belonging in class, and the impact this can have over their ability to focus on academic content.

Recognise and praise sincere effort above academic attainment, recognising that everyone begins a challenge from a different base-line.

"Every interaction is an intervention". It possibly sounds trivial but did you know that for some pupils, getting a smile from you as they walk into class can make all the difference?

Top tips for teachers in supporting pupil well-being in class

Acknowledge the importance of non verbal communication. Try to be self aware in terms of both what you say but also how you say it.

Research has shown that times of transition are one of most commonly identified precursors to EBSA

Recognise the importance of relationships to a pupil's sense of safety and belonging: use peer buddy systems, circles of friends, key worker members of staff; plan in relationship building activities; collect feedback from lunch duty staff.

Recognise the power of 'first impressions' and ensure that ALL staff understand the importance of sincere welcome.

Emotionally Based
EBSA
School Avoidance

Ensure that anxious pupils know who they can go to for support at any time of the school day (can include buddy mentors).

Maintain good communication with the other point of transition in the run up to, during and after the transition. Share relevant and helpful information.

Top tips for schools to support transition

Plan information sharing in bite sized 'chunks', and make sure that information is accessible (taking into account the different learning styles of parents/ carers as well as pupils). Accept the need to repeat information.

Proactively seek and listen to pupil feedback: what are they concerned about; what do they want to know? Who can they share concerns with if they don't want to name them in front of other pupils?

The importance of guiding principles

Accepting that the world is often less than ideal, and in spite of best efforts, it is the case that schools *will* encounter EBSA. In such situations we would guide all those affected to reflect on these core beliefs so as to use person centred, solution focused, positive thinking, avoiding blame and judgement.

- **Everybody is doing the best they can at the time.**

  This includes school staff, pupils, parents and carers. Everyone has bad days when perhaps they don't listen well or respond to you in the way that you'd hoped. Still try to assume that they've done the best they can with the patience and energy that they can muster up at the time. Try to forgive where possible, whilst gently persisting with what you believe to be right and helpful.

- **All people, even in adverse situations, have the capacity to change.**

  Addressing EBSA is hard but don't give up hope: change IS possible.

- **People have an innate desire to connect with others**.

  Relationships with others (or an absence of) are very often involved to some extent in causing EBSA, so they have to be central to resolving it too. Our sense of connection to others is fundamental to our general wellbeing, engagement in education, sense of safety and recovery from adversity.

- **People must be actively involved in their own change process**.

  If change is to be effective, meaningful and authentic then it has to come from the person at the centre who is wanting things to change ("Do *with*, not *to*")

- **Affirmation and appreciation of strengths is the key to supporting change.**

  It might be satisfying to 'off load' , but a rigid focus on what's *not* working, where the deficit is, who's at fault etc. doesn't tend to lead to positive change.

We know from research that recovery from adversity is facilitated by the development of:

- ✓ **Positive relationships and a sense of connectedness**
- ✓ **Strengths**
- ✓ **Hope**
- ✓ **A sense of safety (physical and emotional)**
- ✓ **Self – efficacy**

EBSA: a whole school graduated response.

In an ideal world, schools would feel like safe and supportive places where all children and young people are able to accept and manage the small amounts of worry or anxiety that come with new experiences or challenges. It is normal, for example, to experience some worry at the start of a new school year, transitioning to a new class, teacher or school, prior to an exam or perhaps before taking part in a performance in front of an audience. Taking a whole school approach that aims to 'prevent' school avoidance is about creating that safe and supportive environment where pupils learn how to manage a whole range of emotions and develop the skills and confidence to overcome their challenges and take brave steps towards their goals.

Occasionally we would expect a child or young person to need a bit of additional support to understand and manage their feelings of worry, perhaps via teaching them some breathing techniques, giving additional 'chat time' or devising plans to help them prepare for or adapt to change.

Sometimes anxious feelings seem to take more hold and their impact is felt in a more profound or sustained way. At these times the uncomfortable mental and physical 'symptoms' that are associated with anxiousness, low mood or other feelings akin to feeling 'unable to cope', might lead to a child or young person disengaging from with certain activities, interactions or environments, and this is when patterns of non-attendance start needing significantly more support and effort to overcome.

The next slide shows a simple graphic to capture this idea of a graduated response.
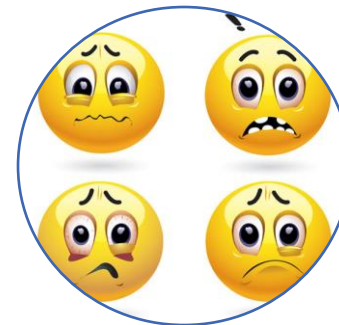
EBSA – a graduated response to need

Experiencing 'normal' worry and recovering from it

Whole school systems & practices in place to promote good mental health and well-being

Experiencing slightly elevated anxiety and needing some temporary additional support

Partnership working to agree on and implement appropriate support strategies

Experiencing significant anxiety, needing more focused and intensive level of support.

A more rigorous round of information gathering needed to fully understand the nature of the CYP's anxiety, with a co-produced plan-do-review cycle in place, involving external agencies if appropriate

Anxiety is impacting significantly on the CYP's ability to function; CYP's attendance is either very low or they are no longer attending their setting

Committed effort to work holistically with the family and CYP, and external agencies where appropriate, to build relationships and take small, agreed, supported steps towards gentle re-engagement.
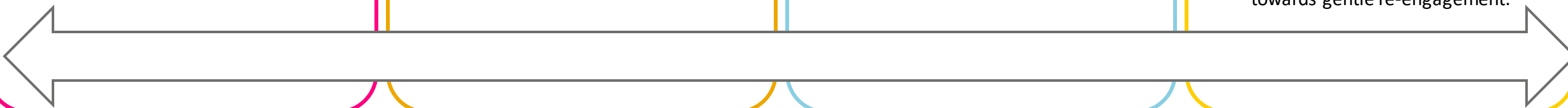
Universal
Whole school practice
(prevention)

Targeted
Individualised practice
(prevention via intervention)

Bespoke / individualised support
- Recognising when greater support is needed and why

Very focused, intensive support
with specialist involvement where necessary

Helping someone move from comfort to growth.

- There are various graphic representations on-line of 'the learning zone' concept, loosely based on the original 'zone of proximal development' theory attributed to Lev Vygotsky.

- These can be helpful in our understanding of the human tendency to withdraw to a comfort zone when we feel a sense of threat or fear.

- **To move back into and through the 'fear zone' <u>is really hard</u>.**

- **We typically need help from another person to help us get back to a zone where we can learn and grow.**

Capturing the pros and cons of school attendance for a worried child – An example grid to structure thinking

1. Nature of discontent / worry	2. What a discontented child might get out of staying at home	3. What a discontented child might get out of coming into school	4. What would need to be in place in school to enable column 3 to happen?
Child is being ostracised / bullied / left feeling lonely or isolated	• Not having to listen to the horrible remarks • Avoidance of those horrible feelings of fear / loneliness / shame • Temporary respite for their wounded self-confidence or self-esteem • A chance to be with an adult who loves them and might make them feel safe again	• An opportunity to learn how to address / deal with / overcome / 'live through' the bullying • An opportunity to strengthen other friendships / relationships so as to experience some people as 'good' and challenge generalised fears ie. to notice the exceptions • An opportunity to feel strong and empowered	• Staff who notice and who are approachable and able to address the issue asap • Generally welcoming and supportive ethos • Opportunities to feel 'good' in other ways throughout the school day • Supportive peers • Social support mechanisms (e.g. on the playground) • Restorative practice • Etc
Child is noticing that they 'can't keep up' with their classmates academically and has a sense of being different / slower	• *Temporary* respite from feeling like 'the only one' • *Temporary* respite from feeling 'bad' – Perhaps a chance to indulge in an activity / hobby that they know they CAN do well • A chance (perhaps) to learn at home at their own pace, perhaps with 1:1 support of a parent with lots of breaks in between	• An opportunity to have trained teaching staff support them with their learning need. • An opportunity to experience feelings of 'success' in other ways / via other activities • An opportunity to realise that academic grades are not the 'be all and end all' and that other things in school life have importance and can be enjoyed – it is effort and progress that matters	• Good provision map with sufficient staffing • Staff who are confident in differentiating for a range of learning needs and styles • A broad curriculum with lots of curriculum enrichment and extra-curricular activities • A way of recognising and rewarding effort and progress that feels sincere and meaningful to the children • Etc

EBSA and Trauma

Sadly, for some pupils, the causes of EBSA relate to an experience of trauma. Schools may find it helpful to address EBSA in these circumstances through the lens of trauma informed practice. Suffolk Educational Psychologist Dr. Jemma Carter has put together the model here to assist understanding, which is further explained in text and video using the links in blue.

Creating a trauma sensitive classroom - edpsy.org.uk
Using the Applied Trauma Responsive Classroom observation schedule - edpsy.org.uk

Emotionally Based EBSA School Avoidance

Regulate, Relate, Reason

Future planning — Have we supported the child to consider their future hopes/dreams/goals and potential pathways to achieve these?

Resilience and coping skills — Have we supported emotional literacy and social skill development? Have we identified where the child would benefit from further intervention?

Autonomy — Have we empowered the child to feel a sense of agency and control within their education?

Identity (Who am I? Why am I?) — Have we supported the child to explore who they are, their self-hood and their story?

Affiliation and belonging — Have we proactively addressed the child's sense of belonging? Are there positive peer attachments?

Co-attunement and connection — Is there a trusted adult who is offering unconditional positive regard? Are opportunities for connection occurring throughout the day?

Safety (Physical, Emotional, Interpersonal) — Does the classroom feel safe? Do the adults feel safe? Does the child feel safe to express themselves?

Applied Trauma Responsive Classroom Model (Carter, 2023)