



Emotionally Based

EBSA

School Avoidance

Understanding
what it is and
what might cause
or contribute to it.

What is 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 suddenly in response to a significant event, or it can be more insidious, 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.



One way of understanding possible contributory factors to school avoidance is to see them as 'push or pull' influences.



Push Factors:



Pull 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 away from school' because it leaves me feeling... (for example)

Ashamed

Incompetent

Unwelcome / Not wanted

Lonely

Unwell / Panicky / Anxious

Misunderstood

Unsafe

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... (for example)

I will get more time with my parent / carer

I will be able to make sure people at home are OK

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

Another way of understanding school avoidance is to see it as the result of a complex combination of child, family and school factors.

Predisposing factors:

What has caused or is causing vulnerability / susceptibility for school avoidance?

'Within family'

- Any health concerns in the family (mental or physical?)
- Any concerns around the safety or wellbeing of family members?
- Any other reasons why the child might be worried about those at home?
- Any negative wider family experiences of school or education that are somehow filtering down to the focus child?
- Any challenges in terms of relationship between parent / carer and school, and / or in the ease of communication between them (including methods of communication)?
- Any challenges within morning routines (e.g. how many siblings need to get to school too; what is the journey to school like; do parents need to get to work)?

Precipitating factors:

Has anything triggered the school avoidant behaviour?

Perpetuating factors:

What is helping to maintain the school avoidant behaviour?

'Within child'

- Any SEN? Any issues around academic progress?
- Any sensory sensitivities?
- Are there executive functioning challenges?
- Any independent learning skills difficulties?
- Any social skills challenges?
- Any emotional literacy difficulties?
- Are there behaviour, thinking or feeling patterns / tendencies that are challenging in some way?
- How about levels of resiliency?
- Any health concerns?

'Within school'

- Any challenges around identifying and meeting the learning needs of this child?
- Any bullying or social isolation going on?
- Any tricky relationships / interactions with school staff?
- Any conflicting messages coming from school staff (e.g. some reaching out to offer support whilst others threatening punishment?)
- Any difficulties with particular school procedures / routines / facilities (e.g. use of toilets / changing for P.E.)
- Any friends displaying anxiety?
- Any issues relating to particular lessons or other times of day (e.g. break and lunch).

These are a small sample of **predisposing**, **precipitating** and **perpetuating factors** that might be helping to create and sustain 'non attendance'

But remember EBSA is not just an 'anxious child' problem. A child not going into school *could* be because...

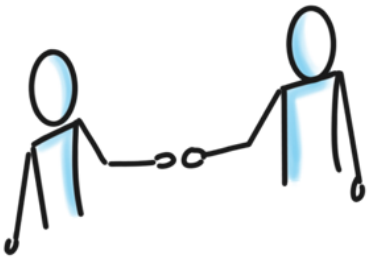
...they are trying to manage an experience that was traumatic to them

...they don't feel able to cope with facing a person routinely being mean to them or don't feel a sense of belonging in school

...their parents / carers don't know how to help them emotionally regulate enough to safely get them into school

...they are fearful of not keeping up with learning or not understanding lessons and what this means for them

...they are worried that a parent/ carer won't be OK if they leave them at home and come into school



...Causes could be (though rarely are) singular or simple, or they could be (and usually are) complex and multiple.



Key messages and things to remember:

- **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.**

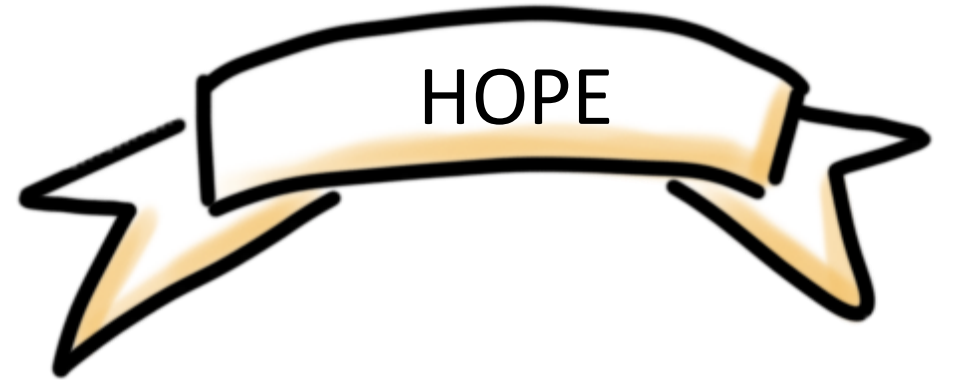
It might be satisfying to 'off load' , but a rigid focus on what's *not* working, where the deficit is, who's at fault etc. doesn't tend to lead to positive change.

See [Psychology and Therapeutic Services Keys to Inclusion - Suffolk County Council](#) for an outline of the core beliefs and values underpinning person-centred practice, which is central to the approach we use in Suffolk.

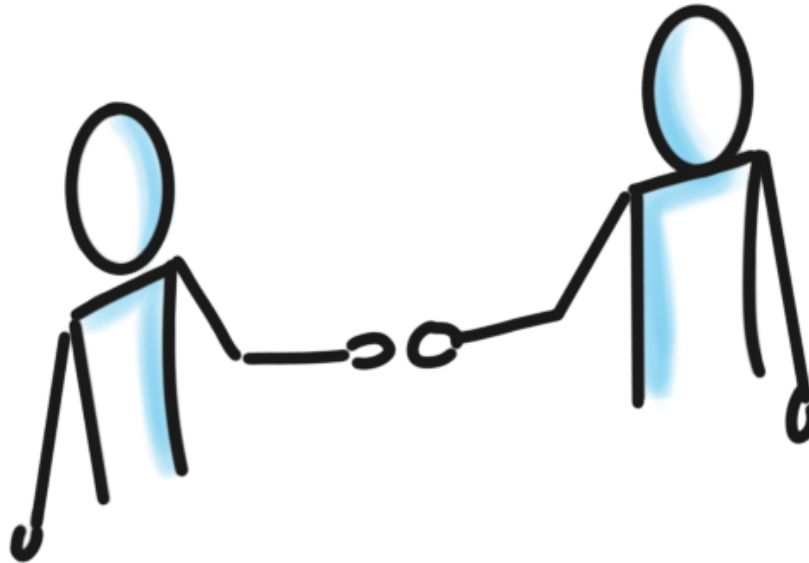
Research shows that recovery from adversity is facilitated by the development of:



SENSE OF SAFETY –
EMOTIONAL & PHYSICAL



SELF-EFFICACY



POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS



STRENGTHS