Maximising School Attendance:

Identifying and supporting attendance difficulties, including emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA)

Guidance for Schools, Settings and Support Agencies working with Children, Young People and their Families

Wakefield Educational Psychology Service

EDUCATIONAL
PSYCHOLOGY
SERVICE

Contents

A note to the reader

Please note that the terms 'school' and 'pupil' are used throughout this guidance for consistency. However, the content is relevant to all children, young people and staff within any educational setting, including early years, enhanced provision and further education.

Introduction

This guidance has been written to provide school staff and other professionals with a practical toolkit for identifying and supporting pupils who have attendance difficulties, including those which can be described as emotionally-based (EBSA).   It also includes suggestions on whole school good practice and preventative strategies for maximising school attendance for all pupils.

Wakefield Educational Psychology Service (EPS) has produced this guidance by drawing on the current evidence base, information from literature and from other Educational Psychology Services. In particular, we would like to acknowledge West Sussex EPS, Sheffield EPS, Essex County Council, alongside Solar and the Community Educational Psychology Service from Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council.

This guidance has been divided into chapters to provide the reader with information on the varying nature of school non-attendance, the terminology used in this area, preventative whole school systems, and the most effective ways to assess and support pupils who are experiencing difficulties:

1. School Attendance Difficulties, EBSA, Anxiety, ASD
2. Whole school approach
3. Early identification
4. Assess
5. Plan
6. Do
7. Review

Within the accompanying Appendix & Resource Pack, are a range of suggested approaches, resources and references to help with the identification, assessment and support of any type of attendance difficulty.

Chapter 1: School Attendance

The latest Department for Education guidance (May 2022) 'Working together to improve school attendance' emphasises a coherent and joined up approach to supporting and improving attendance.

> Improving attendance is everyone's business. The barriers to accessing education are wide and complex, both within and beyond the school gates, and are often specific to individual pupils and families. The foundation of securing good attendance is that school is a calm, orderly, safe, and supportive environment where all pupils want to be and are keen and ready to learn. (page 6)

www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-together-to-improve-school-attendance

The difficulties associated with school non-attendance are far reaching and can have a negative impact on long-term outcomes including reduced aspirations, poor emotional regulation, mental health difficulties, limited academic progress and reduced employment opportunities (Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Hughes et al, 2010; Lyon & Cotler, 2007). Progress towards a successful reintegration can be slow and at times may feel like you take one step forward and two steps back.

Although this is a complex issue, it's important to be hopeful because positive outcomes can be achieved. Stay curious, take a no-blame approach and be prepared to try different things. Many of the factors associated with positive outcomes will already be present within your school's existing good practice, for example:

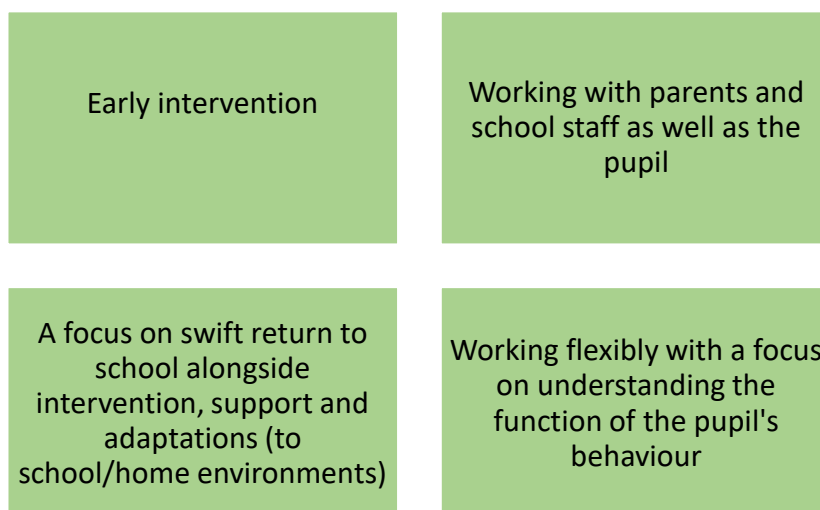|	
Early intervention	Working with parents and school staff as well as the pupil
A focus on swift return to school alongside intervention, support and adaptations (to school/home environments)	Working flexibly with a focus on understanding the function of the pupil's behaviour

Figure 1: Factors associated with positive outcomes for successful reintegration (Baker & Bishop, 2015)

Terminology

There are a great many different terms used to describe school non-attendance. Historically in the literature on this subject, a prolonged absence from school has been referred to as

'school refusal'. Pupils with school attendance difficulties can also be described using labels such as 'school phobic' or 'truant', terms which are now generally considered to be unhelpful. Inconsistent terminology and a lack of shared understanding can be a barrier to finding effective interventions for pupils struggling with school attendance.

The table below outlines a number of different terms and their meanings:

Term	Definition
School Non-Attendance School Absence	Not attending school; a broad term to describe any kind of absence from school.
Truancy Self-Determined Absenteeism	Absence from school without permission of parents/carers or teachers. Pupils are typically seeking fun or another kind of 'reward' elsewhere in the community.
Anxious School Refusal (ASR) School Refusal Emotionally-Based School Refusal (EBSR) Emotionally-Based School Avoidance (EBSA) Emotionally-Based School Absence (EBSA)	Difficulty attending school and/or absence from school on account of severe emotional distress at the time Note: a small number of authors in the literature on this topic use 'school refusal' to indicate truancy!
Separation Anxiety	Medical diagnosis (DSM 5) associated with excessive fear upon leaving (or anticipation of leaving) a major attachment figure e.g. parent/carer
Parentally-Condoned Absence Parental Permissiveness Parent Withholding	Unauthorised absence where parents/carers keep a pupil at home for their own reasons e.g. for company or to act as a young carer
School Phobia	Medical description which may be diagnosed under the category of 'specific phobia' (DSM 5). This can be misleading because there are usually multiple causes and sources of anxiety outside of school.
School Refusal Behaviour (Kearney & Silverman)	Refusal to attend school and/or difficulty remaining in school for an entire day. NB this also includes pupils who may not display common indicators of emotional distress at the time of attending school.

This guidance will use the term **Attendance Difficulties** to refer to behaviours of any pupil who struggles to attend or stay in school/education setting for any reason. This term is consistent with other terminology used in education to describe the needs of pupils, for example literacy difficulties or social communication difficulties.

A pupil may have attendance difficulties that occur occasionally, sporadically, regularly or persistently.

Care must be taken not to attribute cause or motivations which are unknown or misleading e.g. the term 'refusal' suggests a wilfulness on the part of a pupil which can obscure an underlying cause such as anxiety. The term '**Emotionally Based School Avoidance**' (EBSA) may be used to describe cases where it has been established that a pupil's attendance difficulties are primarily because of an emotional distress e.g. anxiety.

Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA)
What is EBSA?

Emotional Based School Avoidance (EBSA) also known as school refusal, Emotional Based School Refusal (EBSR) or Anxiety Related Non-Attendance (ARNA), can be used to describe children and young people who do not attend school due to emotional factors. This absence can often lead to long periods of time away from school. EBSA is different from absence for physical illness and truancy. Most young people experiencing EBSA can be highly anxious and show significant distress about attending school. In many instances, they remain engaged with education and want to return to school even though they feel unable to do so. Often, the young person's anxiety will reduce during weekends or school holidays.

Prevalence of EBSA

Rates of school refusal are generally estimated to be between 1 and 2% of the overall school population (Gulliford & Miller, 2015). However, as the emotional component of EBSA is difficult to measure, an accurate picture of the prevalence of EBSA nationally is not known but is likely to be much higher. Current research indicates that there are no significant links between EBSA and gender, with an equal prevalence of males and females experiencing difficulties (Ingles et al, 2015; Kearney, 2008). In addition, there does not appear to be a link between EBSA and socioeconomic status (King & Bernstein, 2001). The literature suggests that EBSA prevalence is higher amongst secondary-aged students (Elliott, 1999; Gulliford & Miller, 2015) with rises around periods of transition between school phases (King & Bernstein, 2001). Onset of emotionally based school avoidance may be sudden or gradual.

Causes of EBSA

EBSA is a complex issue, and it is likely that several factors, rather than one single cause, contribute to a young person finding attending school difficult. Each child and situation is unique. Some factors are complex and interlinked. For example, they might include the young person, the family and the school environment (Thambirajah et al 2008).

We also understand that the onset of school avoidance appears to be at or at around the time of transition between key stages. Research, for example, continues to show an increase in emotionally based non-school attendance around the time that young people move from primary to secondary school (Nutall & Woods, 2013; Pellegrini, 2007; Thambirajah et al, 2008).

Anxiety and EBSA

Anxiety is recognised as a significant component of EBSA. Anxiety is a normal part of our human experience; short-lived and lower levels of anxiety can be useful to us as stress responses linked to survival. However, heightened levels of anxiety can interfere with everyday life and can have a significant impact on our functioning. The HBSC report (2018) stated that "Over a fifth (22%) of young people reported that they had experienced a high level of emotional problems and other emotional difficulties during the last 6 months."

With regards to EBSA, a young person may experience anxious and fearful thoughts about attending school and their ability to cope within school. Physiological symptoms can include shaking, sweating, nausea, vomiting etc. and may begin the night before or even a few days before school. Young people may also display one or more of the following behaviours; crying, pleading, sleep problems, refusal to get ready for school / leave the house / enter school, worry around school-related issues and psychosomatic illness.

Parents/carers may find themselves on the receiving end of some hostile behaviours as the child or young person strives to avoid the situation which feels threatening and tries to control a situation which feels 'out of control' (Thambirajah et al, 2008).

Figure 2, below, shows the cycle of anxiety that young people can become stuck in where the relief of avoiding an anxiety provoking situation can maintain/increase the anxiety.
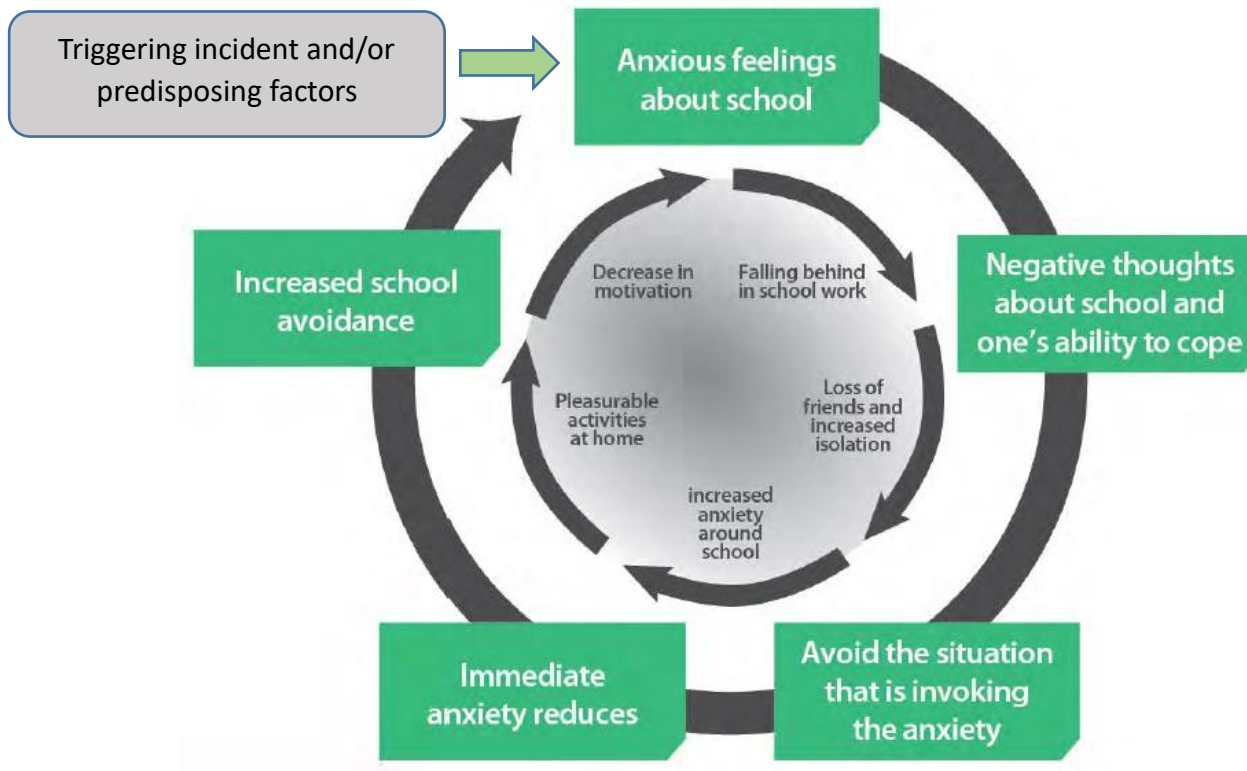
Figure 2: The cycle of EBSA and secondary complications (Hinton House Training Webinar, Dr Tina Rae)

It should also be noted that some young people experiencing EBSA, can appear to function well when they are in school, or may socialise well in different situations and environments. This discrepancy can lead to potential misunderstandings of a complex situation.

EBSA and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

The prevalence of anxiety in pupils with autism is yet to be fully understood owing to a lack of research in this domain, it is, however, frequently cited as a difficulty associated with the diagnosis. Common triggers of anxiety for pupils with autism are depicted in the image below and can include changes in the environment, unfamiliarity, changes of routine and increased or decreased sensory sensitivity to stimuli, such as light or noise.
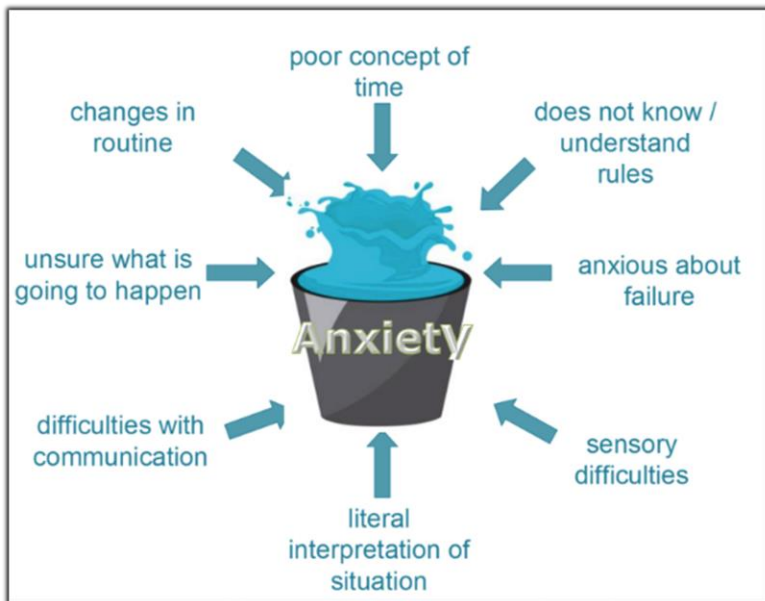
(West Sussex Guidance, 2020)

The way in which autism manifests within an individual is dependent on their learning profile and resilience. The prevalence of anxiety is more likely at certain stages in pupil's development, for example during adolescence as social demands become more complex and in the context of an increase in environmental demands, for example learning demands and expectations. Autistic pupils may also experience increased difficulties during significant educational transitions, such as between the primary and secondary phases of education.

The complex social and sensory environment of schools can be overwhelming for autistic pupils; responding to such demands can be exhausting, which can lead to them becoming overloaded and can predispose them to EBSA. This is reflected in statistics which show higher levels of EBSA amongst pupils with autism (Department for Education, 2021).

Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic

A number of guidance documents were developed by Wakefield EPS that focussed on preparation for school return, bereavement & loss and managing emotional well-being of pupils & staff. Work was started on this guidance following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, some suggestions here may be useful to pupils experiencing anxiety about returning to or reintegrating into school due to situations surrounding Coronavirus but are also applicable to prolonged and/or repeated absences.

In addition, some children may experience an increase in school-related worries due to the ongoing situation, as highlighted in the figure below. These worries and anxieties are normal reactions to the current changing and unfamiliar situation; experiencing them does not mean that the pupils will go on to have difficulties attending school. However, it is useful to take these factors into consideration during preparations for a return to school and to put appropriate support in place. Establishing a sense of safety will be important for many pupils and this can be supported through sharing visual and verbal information about safety behaviours in schools, preparing pupils for what their school environment will look like, re-establishing routines and re-connecting with staff and peers. On-going and open communication with parents will help schools to recognise which children may need additional support as they transition back to school.
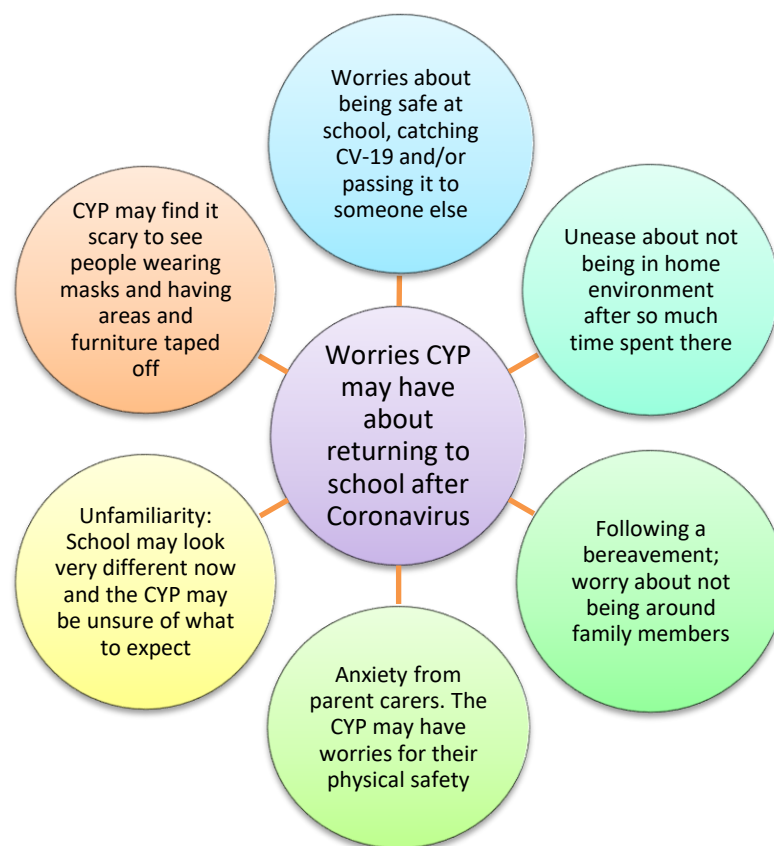

Figure 3: Worries a pupil may have about returning to school after Coronavirus (adapted from Bolton guide)

For further information and resources to support pupils with coronavirus related worries and anxieties, please visit the Covid-19 page on the Wakefield Local Offer website:

COVID-19 | Important information | Wakefield SEND Local Offer (mylocaloffer.org)

Chapter 2: Whole School Approach

Schools can be highly complex organisations, placing multiple demands on pupils. Attendance difficulties typically have a range of contributory factors (individual, home, school). The school environment is likely to constitute both risk and protective factors for pupils.

- **Protective factors may include** inclusive ethos, caring form tutor/teacher, senior member of staff with knowledge of attendance, pastoral and emotional wellbeing support, effective anti-bullying policies.
- **Risk factors may include** high turn-over of staff, lack of friends/positive relationships, multiple transitions, ineffective differentiation in teaching and learning.

School systems for maximising school attendance and for supporting individual pupils who have attendance difficulties should broadly look like this:
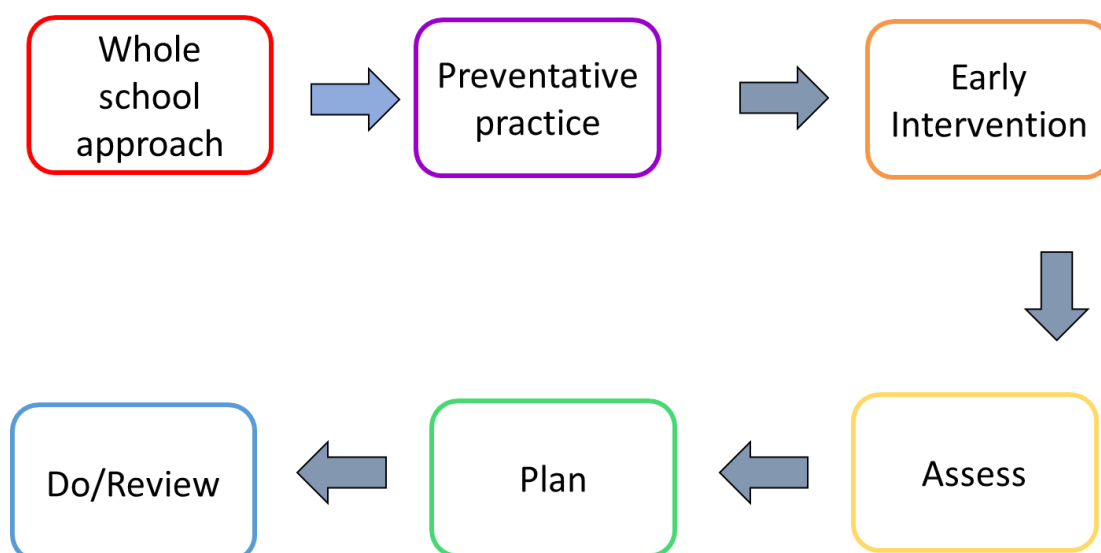
Figure 4: Flow Chart of School Systems for Maximising Attendance

To maximise attendance in schools it's important to ensure each and every pupil experiences the best quality of education. School leaders can raise expectations for high attendance by implementing procedures with care. This works best when policies are applied to the whole school, whilst targets are set according to individual pupil circumstances.

Whole school ethos

In order to maximise attendance and be well-placed to support attendance difficulties, it's crucial to maintain good ethos around emotional wellbeing generally and attendance specifically. This should be driven by the senior leadership and actively involve all members of staff. This could include attendance-focused assemblies, bulletins and newsletters, posters etc. There may be a place for systems involving positive feedback for good attendance, but

schools should think carefully about the nature of these – research tells us that extrinsic rewards often reduce intrinsic motivation (and also damage relationships).

Striving to make school a place where pupils are keen to be is, of course, helpful in maximizing attendance! When pupils feel safe, happy, understood, and able to learn, they will usually do their best. Ensure that all members of the school community feel a sense of belonging and connectedness.

Personalised learning
High quality teaching and effective differentiation across the curriculum is needed to ensure that pupils experience success as a learner on a daily basis (ensure that the school's SEN systems are being implemented effectively). Breakfast clubs can help with enabling attendance for those who are struggling. Consider using a 'personal best' approach with individuals who have special educational needs or disabilities, so that they work towards self-improvement rather than comparing their progress to peers.

Attendance team
The school should have a team of staff members who lead on the day-to-day work around monitoring, assessing and planning support for attendance difficulties. Members of the attendance team will work collaboratively with parents/carers. Have defined roles and responsibilities for the staff in the attendance team and think about how they will link with other relevant colleagues in school e.g. SEN team, Heads of Year etc.

Attendance policy
A school's attendance policy is a crucial document for managing pupil attendance effectively and consistently. An attendance policy must be clear, transparent and fit for purpose, containing detailed information relating to pupil and parental/carer expectations for all attendance and punctuality requirements. Attendance policies must reference the law with regards to school attendance, including the possible sanctions that can be applied, however it is crucial to ensure that parents/carers feel supported and able to request help if difficulties arise. The policy should be displayed on a school's website and reviewed annually.

Implementing this guidance
Schools need to be clear about how they are implementing the approaches recommended in this guidance. In addition to their attendance policy, it is useful for schools to have a 'provision map' or similar, showing the types of support available for pupils who have been assessed as having attendance difficulties.

Whole school approach to EBSA

Taking a whole school (systemic) approach to EBSA; considering how the factors relate to each other and viewing the problem as *between* the factors rather than *inside* the child means that responsibility does not lie within one part of the whole. Acknowledging the value and supporting the mental health and well-being of all individuals within a system is key. Viewing the problem as a temporary one that does not assign blame to any factors makes it open to change (Thambirajah et al 2008).

We suggest that schools complete a whole school audit of the interrelated factors within the organisation. By looking at the systems already in place and creating opportunity for open discussion, you will develop a solid foundation that works for your particular school.

➢ A whole school EBSA audit tool can be found in Appendix 1 of the Appendix & Resource Pack

Public Health England produced guidance for school leaders to promote emotional health and wellbeing in schools based around eight principles. These have been adapted and extended in the diagram below to include specific ideas to support attendance for school leadership to include within their whole school approach.
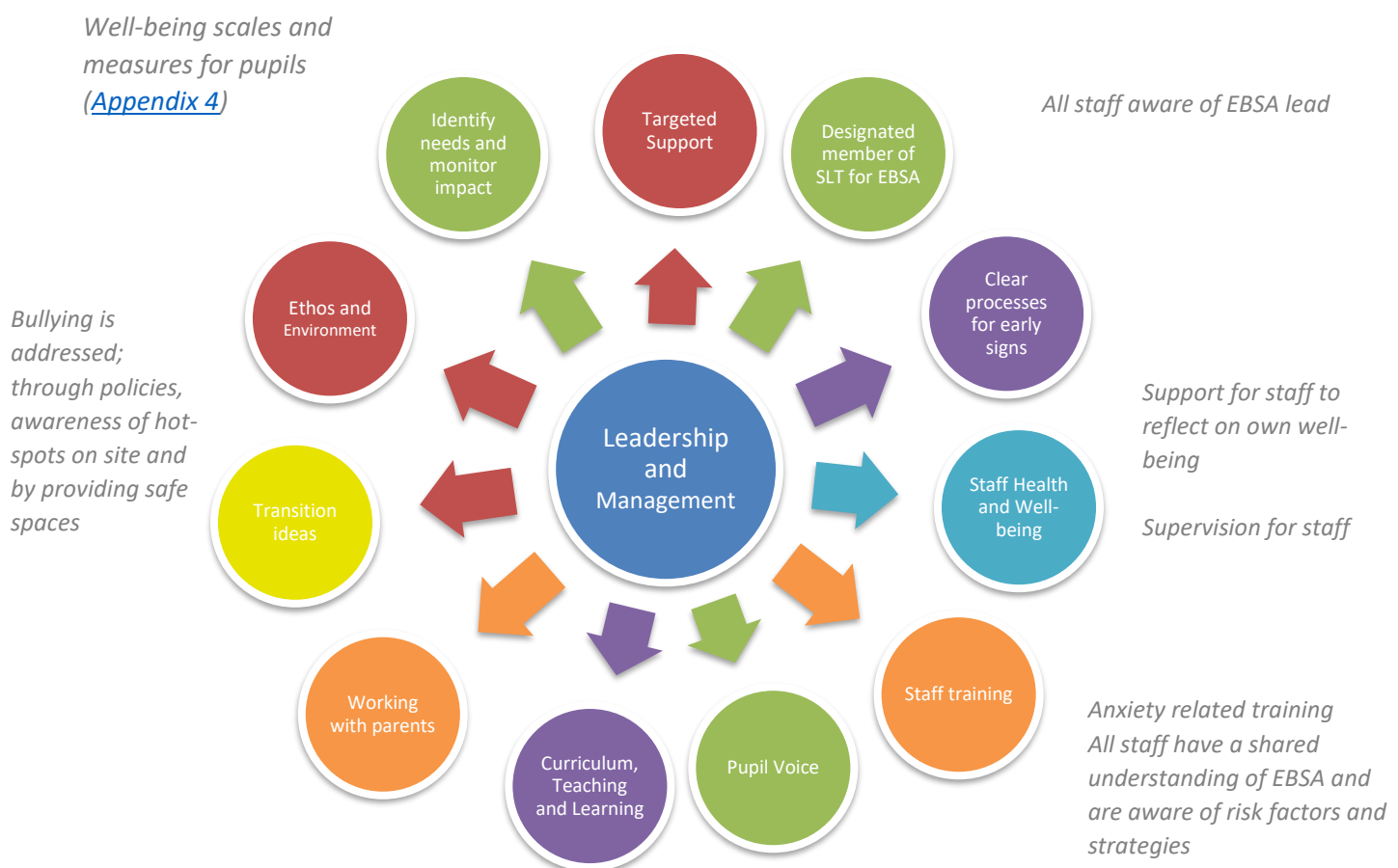

Figure 5: Whole school approach to emotional health and well-being (Adapted from Promoting children and young people's emotional health and well-being, Public Health England, 2015)

Transition Support

Transitions are a very important part of anyone's life and especially so with children moving from Early Years settings into primary, and then into secondary school. Most children can make this change by adapting successfully to their new environment, routines, larger numbers of pupils and teaching styles, as both primary and secondary schools are well versed in preparing students for this. However, some students will find this change harder than others.

Moving from Early Years settings to school

For some children starting in Reception, this may be the first time that they have been away from their parents for extended periods of time, and they may struggle to follow the routine of the school day. These children may find the transition into school difficult, and you may see behaviours related to separation anxiety (e.g. crying, clinging to parents).

- Some things that could be helpful to do with children in Reception (or encourage their parents to do with them) include:
- Reading story books about going to school
- Parents and puipls practicing their walk to school and trying on their school uniform
- Pictures and video tour of the school building (e.g. entrance, toilets, cloakroom, playground, classroom, corridors) and key members of staff
- Use of transitional objects to ease the pupil's anxiety. If staff know about a child who is anxious, then it may be helpful to ensure, where possible, that they have a familiar peer in their group.

Primary schools can help by

- Devote time in the summer term to talking about secondary school in positive terms, debunking myths and solving problems with humour
- Work through a transition preparation programme in collaboration with the secondary schools
- Help children with:
  - finding their way around on a floor plan
  - following timetables
  - thinking about organisation of bag packing, equipment and so on
- Provide extra visits to the secondary schools combining SEND students with those from other schools

Secondary schools can help by

- Nominate staff members to welcome students; meet and greet, hold check-ins etc.
- Facilitate visits by year 7, 8 and 9 students to primary feeder schools to have informal discussions with Y6 pupils
- Hold an open evening allowing students to walk around the school and meet some staff

- Take photos and videos of areas of the school and key staff, for familiarisation over the summer holiday
- Provide a map and an exemplar timetable for familiarisation over the summer holiday
- Highlight the positive aspects of the secondary school
- Provide personalised transition visits if necessary

Parents and carers can help by
- Talk in positive terms about the move
- Discuss it in terms of a 'fresh start' for children that have not experienced a positive time in school
- Help your child develop independence skills by encouraging them to organise themselves with small aspects of their day during the summer break
- Look at and talk about the floor plans/timetable/key staff
- Walk past or drive to the new school to familiarise your child with the building and entrance and local area
- Practise catching the bus if this is what your child will be expected to do
- Help your child budget for lunch and drinks if they have any shopping or visits with friends during the summer
- Ensure that your child has the correct uniform and the various equipment stated on any paperwork sent by secondary schools

Derby City SENCOs & Dr Judith McAlister (2019) & Essex County Council (2023)

Chapter 3: Early Identification and Intervention

Early identification is key. By noticing problems with attendance early and acting it can be possible to prevent difficulties becoming severe and entrenched. There should also be a whole school approach where staff:

- have an understanding of attendance difficulties,
- be able to recognise the possible indicators,
- remain curious about a pupil's behaviour, refraining from making assumptions,
- communicate effectively and share information with colleagues and parents (Solihull guide p10)

Learnings from Local Research

In 2022, Wakefield Council were successful in a bid to deliver a project through the Partnerships for People and Place (PfPP) initiative, funded by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities. The Wakefield project aimed to reduce the rate of persistent absence caused by Emotionally Based School Avoidance.

Taking an Appreciative Inquiry approach, semi-structured interviews were used to explore the experiences of young people and their parents/carers within an identified cluster area of the district. Those young people who volunteered had missed at least 10% of school sessions in academic year 2021-2022 or at least 10% of school sessions between September 2022 – December 2022.

The conclusions drawn from this study reflected that which was already found in other research conducted with young people and their families across the UK:

- There are often inconsistent responses from school staff and professionals in other services
- The needs of the child being recognised too late, calling for the need for early identification
- There are too many gaps in understanding around school attendance difficulties, including EBSA, in schools and amongst professionals

In light of this, a 'compassionate approach' to supporting families experiencing EBSA, alongside recommendations of support and interventions are made. A Compassionate Approach is presented as a model below:
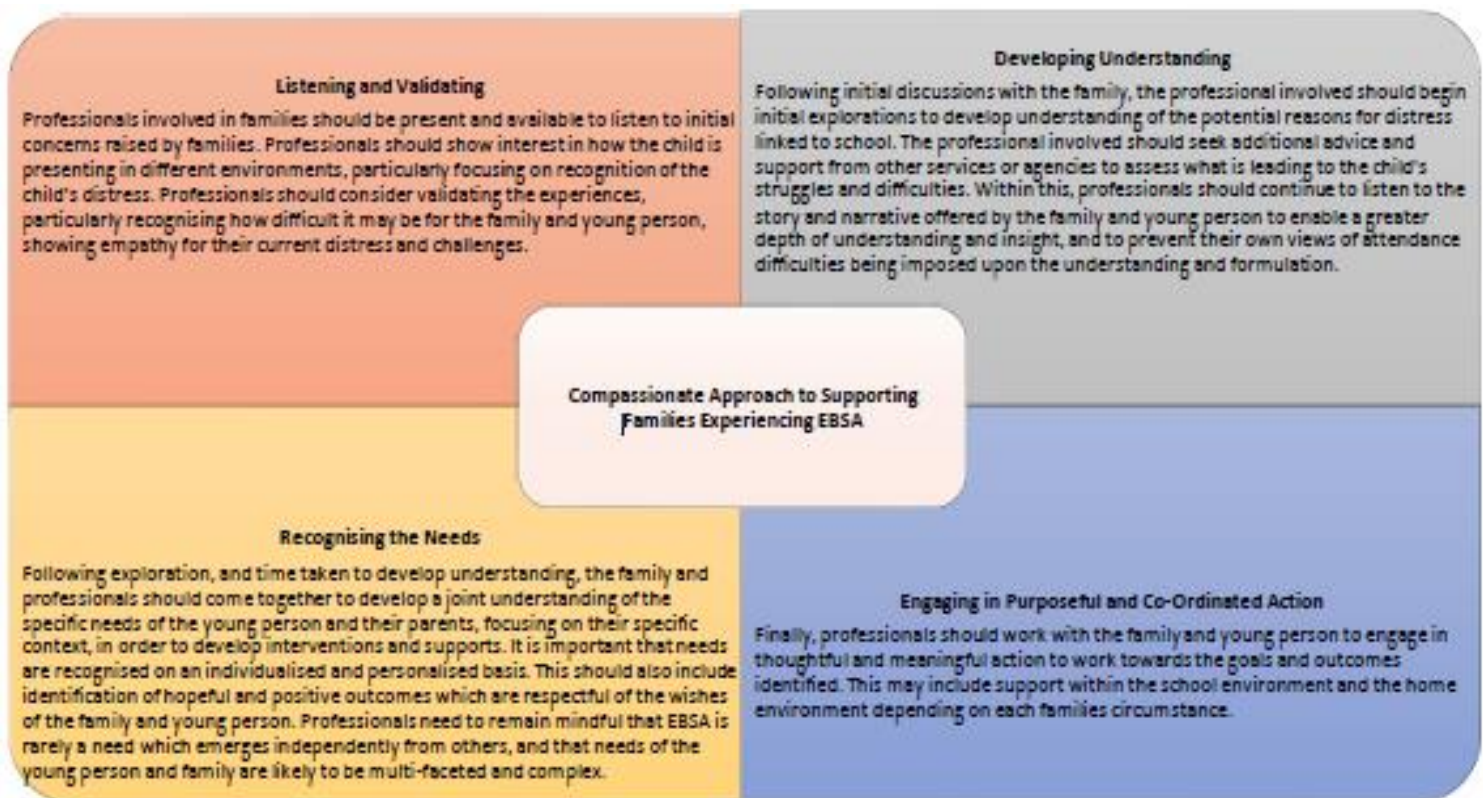
Listening and Validating

Professionals involved in families should be present and available to listen to initial concerns raised by families. Professionals should show interest in how the child is presenting in different environments, particularly focusing on recognition of the child's distress. Professionals should consider validating the experiences, particularly recognising how difficult it may be for the family and young person, showing empathy for their current distress and challenges.

Developing Understanding

Following initial discussions with the family, the professional involved should begin initial explorations to develop understanding of the potential reasons for distress linked to school. The professional involved should seek additional advice and support from other services or agencies to assess what is leading to the child's struggles and difficulties. Within this, professionals should continue to listen to the story and narrative offered by the family and young person to enable a greater depth of understanding and insight, and to prevent their own views of attendance difficulties being imposed upon the understanding and formulation.

Compassionate Approach to Supporting Families Experiencing EBSA

Recognising the Needs

Following exploration, and time taken to develop understanding, the family and professionals should come together to develop a joint understanding of the specific needs of the young person and their parents, focusing on their specific context, in order to develop interventions and supports. It is important that needs are recognised on an individualised and personalised basis. This should also include identification of hopeful and positive outcomes which are respectful of the wishes of the family and young person. Professionals need to remain mindful that EBSA is rarely a need which emerges independently from others, and that needs of the young person and family are likely to be multi-faceted and complex.

Engaging in Purposeful and Co-Ordinated Action

Finally, professionals should work with the family and young person to engage in thoughtful and meaningful action to work towards the goals and outcomes identified. This may include support within the school environment and the home environment depending on each families circumstance.

Figure 5: Adapted from Whitby, 2023

Whilst it is recognised that this model is embedded within this toolkit, many of the families reported that the guidance is not yet embedded and that a compassionate approach is not experienced by all families. The study made further practical recommendations to address this:

1. For whole-school training around EBSA to be made available to all school staff, including non-teaching members of staff including administrative staff who may engage in young people and families as part of their role; this will enable a consistent understanding and response for families.

2. For similar training to be made available to frontline professionals in social care and health to ensure consistency of messages and support avenues for families across the district.

3. As part of the training, emphasis should also be placed on early intervention and its importance in potentially increasing positive outcomes.

4. Parents have shown valuable insight during this project; professionals may wish to consider developing training/workshops linked to EBSA which includes collaboration with parents and other third sector organisations to enable 'lived experience' to be a part of the training.

5. For a compassionate and early intervention approach to be emphasised, as part of training, in best practice for supporting families and young people describing early concerns which may link to EBSA.
6. For a review of approaches to non-attendance to be conducted by relevant services and professionals within the council, particularly the use of fines/prosecution, and for district guidance to be developed for schools in relation to this.
7. For school staff working directly with young people and families describing EBSA, such as family support or attendance officers, to access supervision groups as part of an ongoing offer from a relevant service (like the ELSA model).
8. For explicit guidance regarding 'reasonable adjustments in school' for supporting young people experiencing EBSA; this should include guidance linked to adaptations to within school provision, alongside guidance regarding the use of 'part-time timetables' and other approaches which may be implemented when a young person is experiencing EBSA.

Early identification

School plays a key role in the identification of pupils who are currently experiencing or are at risk of developing attendance difficulties. It is crucial for schools to:
- have effective whole school systems, including for 'flagging' merging difficulties
- be vigilant to early indicators and pupils who at risk of attendance difficulties
- employ a thorough 'assess-plan-do-review' cycle for pupils who need a more targeted approach (following similar principles to those used in existing SEND systems) – more on this below
- liaise with other agencies involved with the pupil, including schools of siblings

Risk factors associated with the development of EBSA

Schools should think about how to set 'flags' in their systems to alert the attendance team and school leaders to absences. For example, if a pupil is absent for two days in a row or for more than a certain number of days in a specific period, further exploration is indicated. Similarly, consider how less obvious warning signs can be noted/shared by teaching and support staff e.g. less focused behaviour in lessons, social isolation, stomach complaints etc.

A range of well documented factors place some children at a higher risk of EBSA. These are usually present alongside other changes in circumstance and it is important to bear in mind the interactions between home, school and the wider influences on the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Schools having an awareness of these risk factors can be an important preventative strategy.

Signs and Risk Factors for Emerging EBSA

School factors	Family / home factors	PUPILS factors
• Bullying (the most common factor) • Difficulties with student-teacher relationship and unpredictability at school • Social isolation and loneliness • Teacher stress • Difficulties in particular subjects • Academic demands/high levels of pressure and performance orientated classrooms • Transitions: from primary to secondary, KS3 → KS4 • Transition between home and school; transport, entry to classroom/building • Exams	• Changes to home environment; divorce, separation, parental illness (mental & physical) • High levels of family stress • Overprotection from parent • Dysfunctional family interactions • Being the youngest child • Loss and bereavement • Family history of EBSA • Young carer • Parental psychopathology	• Age (5-6, 11-12, 13-14) • Anxiety and/or depression • Somatic complaints • Difficulties with emotional regulation • Negative thinking, low self-esteem, and limited problem solving ability • Learning difficulties, developmental problems or ASD if unidentified / unsupported • Fear of failure and low self confidence • Separation anxiety / attachment issues with parent • Trauma and ACEs

Figure 6: Adapted from West Sussex guide, Thambirajah et al 2008 and Ingul et al 2019

A tool that profiles risk factors can be found in Appendix 2 of the Appendix & Resource Pack and can be used in a preventative way to reduce the impact on students.

Push and Pull factors

It can be helpful to be aware of the differences between push and pull factors when attempting to identify those at risk of EBSA.
- Push factors – these push the young person **towards** attending school
- Pull factors – these pull the young person **away** from attending school

Push (resilience) factors: push the young person towards attending school

Pull (risk) factors: pull the young person away from attending school:

They are likely to be present across all of the influences in a young person's life and so it can be really useful to identify and analyse them. The Solihull guide tool for mapping these factors can be found in Appendix 2.3 of the Appendix & Resource Pack.
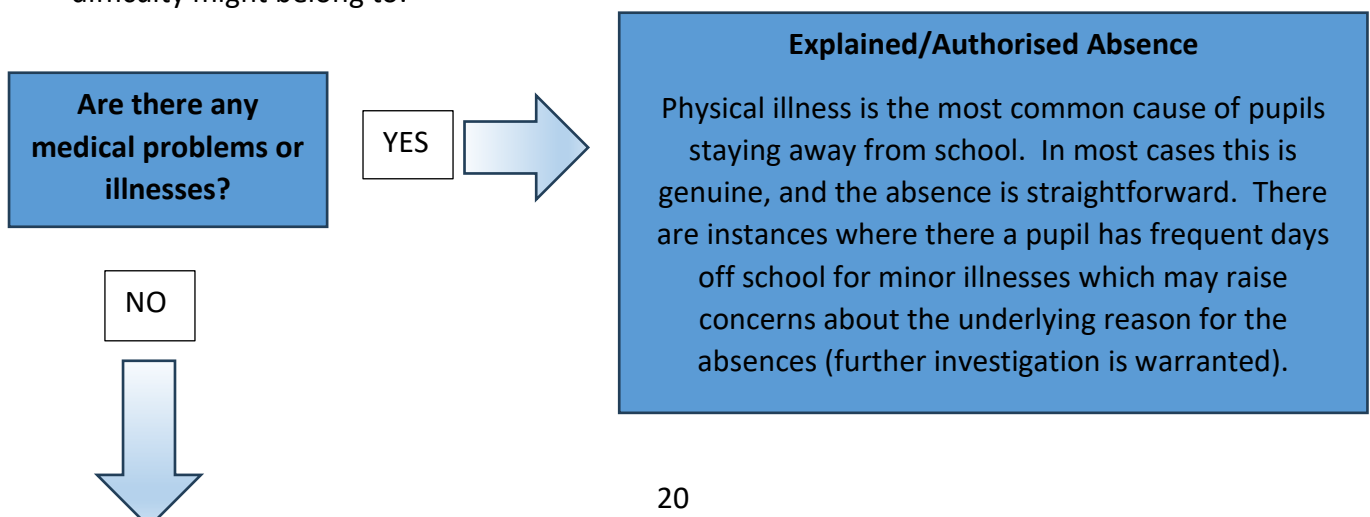
Initial exploration

Most researchers agree that school attendance difficulties are determined by a variety of factors. It is usually impossible to find a single reason for a pupil's difficulties. What we do know is that absence from school becomes a serious concern when:

- stress exceeds support
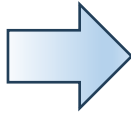- risks are greater than resilience.

It is recognised that there are common risk factors that can be grouped into child, family and school-based themes. Risk and protective factors can be used as a framework for thinking about the different elements that contribute to a pupil's school attendance difficulties. A comprehensive list of Risk & Protective Factors can be found in the appendices.

The first task for anyone faced with a case where a pupil's school attendance is causing concern is to think about the following questions to ascertain which broad category the difficulty might belong to:

Are there any medical problems or illnesses?

YES

NO

Explained/Authorised Absence

Physical illness is the most common cause of pupils staying away from school. In most cases this is genuine, and the absence is straightforward. There are instances where there a pupil has frequent days off school for minor illnesses which may raise concerns about the underlying reason for the absences (further investigation is warranted).

**Are parents/carers concerned about the non-attendance?**

NO →

Parentally Permissive Absence

Parents may allow their child to stay at home for their own reasons e.g. to act as a young carer. They may not value education. They may have been in dispute with the school.

NB Where parents elect to home educate, they are legally obliged to inform the school in writing.

YES ↓

Do parents/carers know the pupil's whereabouts?

NO →
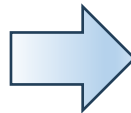
Self-Determined Absence (Truancy)

Pupil doesn't have significant emotional distress at the prospect of attending school and parents/carers are typically unaware of their location. Pupils are seeking a rewarding experience which prevents them attending school. In some cases they may be at home e.g. sleeping or playing computer games. Pupils typically lack interest in schoolwork. They may engage in anti-social behaviour in the community.

YES ↓

**Does the pupil show significant emotional distress in attending school?**

YES →
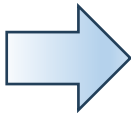
Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA)

The presence of severe emotional distress at the time of attending (or the prospect of attending) school. This is in contrast to self-determined absenteeism, as the pupil will usually be at home during school hours, parents will be aware (and concerned) and there is unlikely to be any significant anti-social behaviour.

There is typically no emotional distress at weekends or during school holidays and the pupil may even function well at various times when they manage to attend school. Persistent emotional distress may include physical symptoms and behavioural dysregulation.

Chapter 4: Assess-Plan-Do-Review Framework

If a pupil is displaying any of these behaviours in a significant fashion, it is important that **fast action** is taken to follow the Assess, Plan, Do, Review steps.
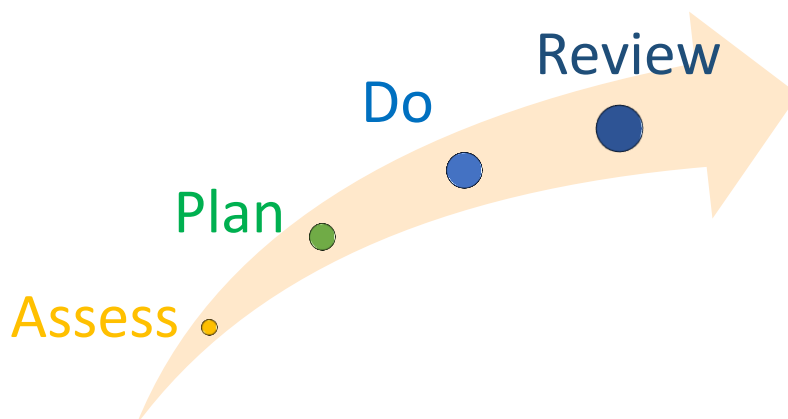
Assess

For pupils with attendance difficulties, a thorough and systematic assessment of the situation is essential in order to plan effective support and intervention. It is quite common for school absence to be treated as a 'blip' by:

>Oversimplifying it ("He's trying it on")

>Minimising it ("It's just a passing phase")

>Attempting to get immediate results ("Get her back in on Monday morning")

These responses are often driven by a lack of understanding, time constraints and lack of clarity of roles. Instead, our mindset should enable us to be curious, asking:

- ✓ What has happened/is happening?
- ✓ Why/why now?
- ✓ What can we do to help?

By drawing on the experience of school staff and parent carers and communicating their understanding of some of the issues throughout the system you will begin to build up a rich picture of the interrelated aspects.

During the initial stages of your journey to understand a pupil's school attendance difficulties, it's helpful to gather information about risk and resiliency factors. Spending time listening to and showing that you value the pupil's experience will also enable you to gain clarity about their needs.

Why do an assessment?

- To analyse the nature and severity of the school attendance difficulties (and the nature and severity of any contributing emotional/wellbeing factors, if appropriate)
- To consider the factors that may be contributing to the school attendance difficulties
- To establish the main function of the absence and to formulate a hypothesis which can inform intervention (see functional model, below)

When should assessment happen?

Early intervention is crucial, especially where pupils have anxiety about attending school; the longer they stay away, the higher their levels of anxiety will be when attempting to return.

In reality, schools are likely to be working towards numerical targets for attendance levels and this can cause a delay in identifying pupils who are anxious about attending, particularly where they are managing to attend sporadically (which may be keeping their attendance data above the cut-off for concern).

Who should do the assessment?

School attendance difficulties come to the attention of various practitioners, but it is usually school staff who will be initially aware of a difficulty (class teacher, form tutor, head of year, SENCo). In the vast majority of cases these frontline professionals who already know and have a positive relationship with the pupil are best place to take the lead on assessment and intervention planning. They may seek support from outside agencies e.g. School Nurse, Inclusion Partner, Educational Psychologist or Education Access Specialist.

[Essex County Council (2023)]

The Functional Model

"All behaviour is communication"

To be able to support pupils who are struggling to attend school, we need to try to understand the functions of the behaviour and consider what the pupil gets from not attending school. Kearney and Silverman (1990) identified that school non-attendance usually serves one of four functions:
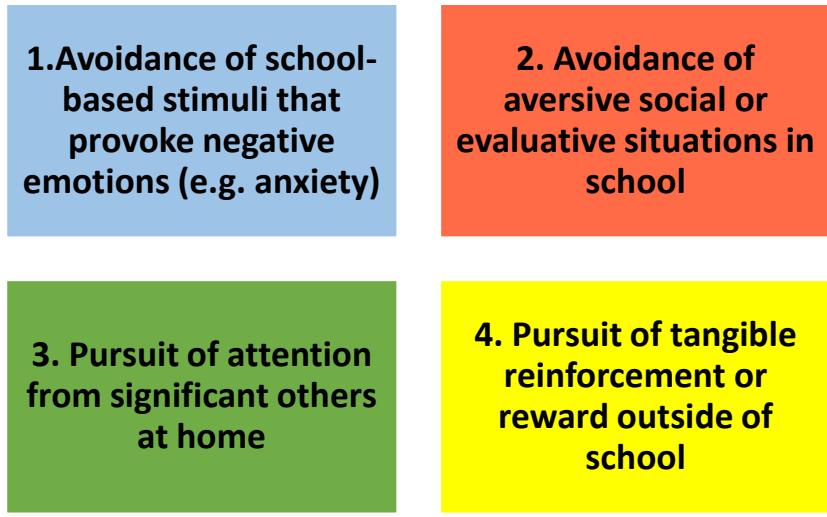
1.Avoidance of school-based stimuli that provoke negative emotions (e.g. anxiety)	2. Avoidance of aversive social or evaluative situations in school
3. Pursuit of attention from significant others at home	4. Pursuit of tangible reinforcement or reward outside of school

Figure 7: Functions of school refusal (Kearney & Silverman, 1990)

When considering the factors that motivate and maintain school attendance difficulties it is extremely helpful to use a functional model of analysis (Kearney and Silverman).

The advantages of this model include the fact that it covers all types of school attendance difficulty that may be encountered. It has also been shown to inform appropriate intervention strategies (within clinical populations in USA).

Within each of the categories above, a pupil's school absence could be anywhere on a continuum of varying degrees of severity, ranging from full but reluctant attendance to no attendance at all.
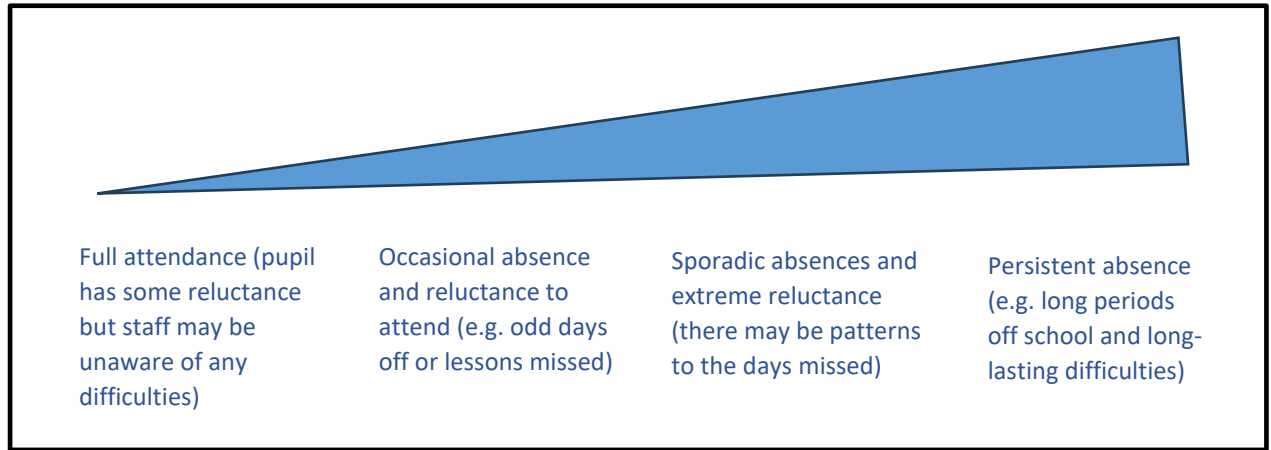

Full attendance (pupil has some reluctance but staff may be unaware of any difficulties)

Occasional absence and reluctance to attend (e.g. odd days off or lessons missed)

Sporadic absences and extreme reluctance (there may be patterns to the days missed)

Persistent absence (e.g. long periods off school and long-lasting difficulties)

Figure: The spectrum of school attendance difficulties (Thambiraja et al, 2008)

More than one function

It is possible for a pupil's non-attendance to have more than one function. There are many cases where pupils avoid school initially for reasons relating to anxiety (e.g. function 1 or 2) and then develop secondary difficulties which fit with Function 4 (e.g. as they develop strategies for self-regulation which are at odds with school attendance, such as sleeping late in the mornings or wearing comfortable clothing at home).

It is crucial to understand each function and to target interventions at all areas of need.
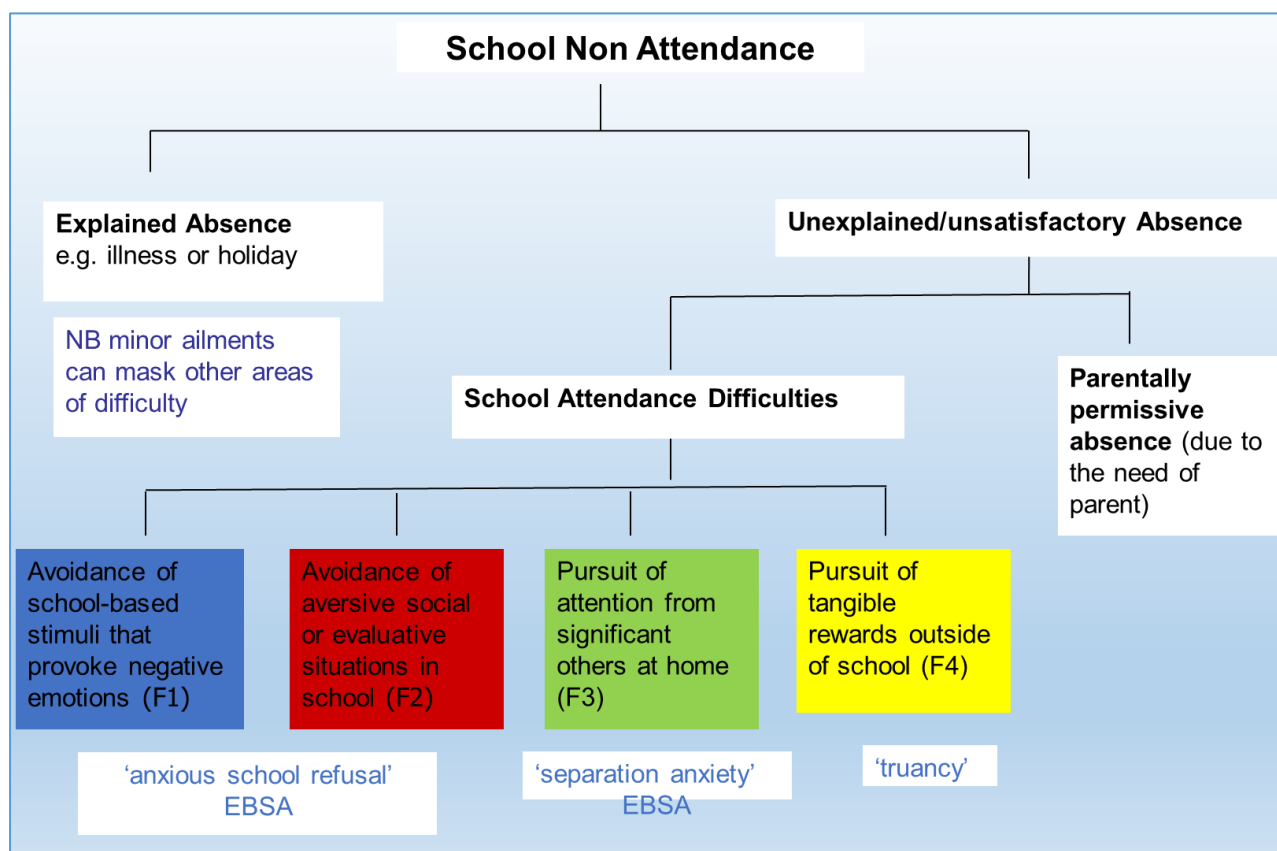

School Non Attendance

Explained Absence e.g. illness or holiday

NB minor ailments can mask other areas of difficulty

Unexplained/unsatisfactory Absence

School Attendance Difficulties

Parentally permissive absence (due to the need of parent)

Avoidance of school-based stimuli that provoke negative emotions (F1)

Avoidance of aversive social or evaluative situations in school (F2)

Pursuit of attention from significant others at home (F3)

Pursuit of tangible rewards outside of school (F4)

'anxious school refusal' EBSA

'separation anxiety' EBSA

'truancy'

Figure 8: Conceptualising attendance difficulties using the 4 functions (adapted from Kearney & Silverman & Essex County Council, 2023)

Information gathering and Assessment tools

There are a range of tools that can be used to gather information from pupil, parent carers, family, staff etc, to build up a rich picture of the factors affecting the pupil's anxiety and/or attendance so that appropriate and supportive strategies can be developed further.

Appendix 3 of the Appendix & Resource Pack provides links to a variety of measures that can be used to further understand the anxiety a young person is experiencing, and can also be used as a discussion tool to illicit the young person's perspective, as well as being used pre and post intervention. Teachers and TAs are very accomplished in differentiating resources and consideration should be given to the format in which these are presented to the pupil.

Gathering information from pupils

When gathering assessment information from pupils it's important to consider who is best placed to do this; which member of staff will make them feel most comfortable and able to talk freely about their worries?

Remember that any pupil currently avoiding school may become anxious when asked to discuss returning; they may be managing their feelings of anxiety by employing avoidant behaviour, so any talk about returning may raise their anxiety as you are proposing taking away their coping mechanism (Solihull guide page 20/21). Let them know that you are aware it may be difficult for them to talk about it with you, but that you would like to know what they think and feel. Empathise with the young person and don't dismiss their anxieties and worries.

The information booklet for young people, produced by Wakefield EPS, may also be useful in supporting a conversation alongside giving them a list of websites to visit for information.

Tools used to gain the pupil's view will vary depending on their age, level of understanding and language skills. Tailor the approach to their strengths and individual needs. Visual supports and drawings can be helpful to support a conversation as many pupils find verbalising their thoughts, feelings and wishes challenging. Several tools are described below.

We would not suggest that all of these are used, but they be used to assist with making a formulation/hypothesis.

Approaches for gathering information from pupils

Timetable review

A method often used by adults working with pupils who display EBSA is to review their timetable and places around school, identifying which lessons and areas are associated with a lot, some, or no anxiety. Using a red, amber and green anxiety code may help. Bear in mind that some pupils may experience anxiety just by thinking about some lessons / lunchtimes / break times / transition to or from school and may need the support of an empathetic adult during this activity Exploration of the issues arising from this can provide useful information.

Collaboratively agree upon a code; for example:
Green = I am happy here or I enjoy this subject
Amber = I feel ok here or I find this subject alright
Red = I feel uncomfortable here or I do not enjoy this subject

**Images taken from the Solihull guide**

Anxiety thermometer or scale

Using an anxiety thermometer or scale can help the pupil start to make links between their emotions and environmental/contextual triggers. Consider the physical environment (toilets, hall, corridors, changing rooms, outside), times of day (arrival, home time, break and dinner times) and specific lessons and activities (reading aloud, group work, writing, tests). Using a map of the school building can be helpful when exploring the impact of the physical environment on their anxiety.
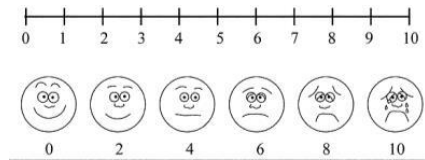
## Card Sort: Function of School Avoidance
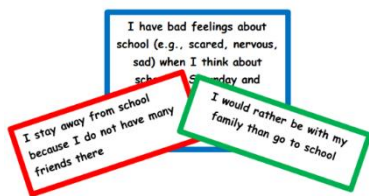
This card sort activity, based on a School Refusal Assessment Scale developed by Kearney (2002), has been devised by Sheffield EPS as a tool for staff to use to develop a greater understanding of a young person's school avoidance. The cards and guidance on how to use them with a pupils can be found in Appendix 3.2 of the Appendix & Resource Pack.

'Ideal School' Activity

This tool developed by Williams and Hanke (2007) can be used to gain an insight into which features of the school (people, environment, lessons etc.) pupils would like to change and why. This activity can be undertaken using Lego, play equipment or drawing. There is a tutorial video for the Ideal self here https://www.drawingtheidealself.co.uk/ alongside a manual with instructions and questions. Guidance and a script for using the Ideal School with a pupils can be found in Appendix 3.4 of the Appendix & Resource Pack.
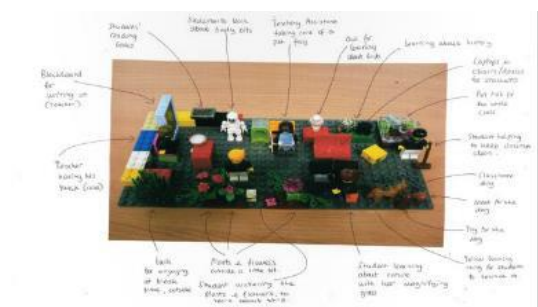

School Stress Survey

This short survey can be used to help the young person identify potential triggers in the school day and environment. The full survey can be found in Appendix 5c or visit https://www.tes.com/teaching-resource/school-stress-survey-6386627

Life Graph

Collaboratively developing a life graph or path with the pupil may help them to consider when their attendance difficulty started, what else was happening in their lives at this time, what events and experiences led up to this point and how they interpreted these, as well as looking at what they would want in the future. Caution should be taken when using this tool, as discussion of life experiences is likely to illicit strong emotions for some young people.
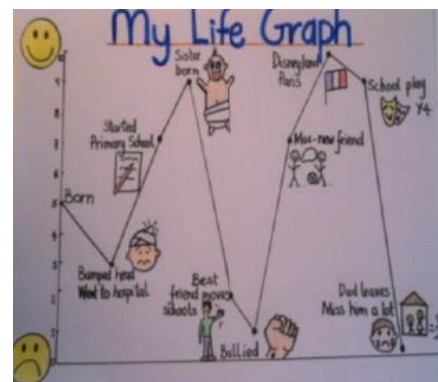
Scripts

A good example of a set of scripts to use to gather the child's view comes from the Solihull guide and can be found in Appendix 3.6. There are also many school-based resources available to ascertain the voice of the PUPILS on the Sheff Kids website

http://www.sheffkids.co.uk/adultssite/pages/communicrateworksheets.html?LMCL=ZVCthI

Externalisation

If a pupil displays high anxiety, it can be helpful to externalise this emotion anxiety, so that they start to view their anxiety as separate from their essential self. This is a great opportunity to get creative and have fun using paints, playdough, clay and collage materials as you explore the anxiety with the pupils. You could try asking:

- What would you call the feeling you have when you think about going to school?
- If your anxiety was a 'thing', what would it look like?
- Can you draw/paint/make it? What would it say?
- How does … get in the way of you coming to school?
- When is … in charge and when are you in charge?

Multi Element Plan (MEP) cards

These cards can be used flexibly to explore the young person's view of themselves in relation to school and to identify potentially helpful and unhelpful environmental factors. The cards can be found on page 36 of the following document from Derbyshire County Council 2008:
http://www.em-edsupport.org.uk/Pages/Download/0eeb08d2-0ae6-4f11-94b8-764f5c283cfb
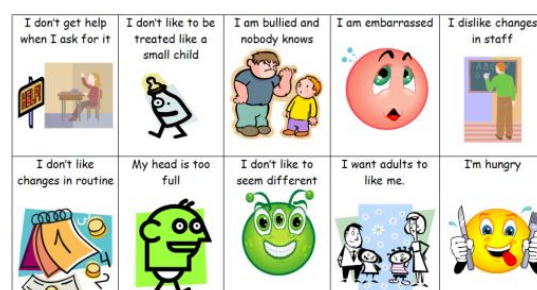
Gathering information from parents/carers

Building a collaborative partnership with parents is often essential to bring about positive outcomes for a young person experiencing attendance difficulties, especially if there is EBSA.

Some parents may find conversations around their child's difficulties challenging, so establishing a curious, empathetic and no-blame approach is important. Wakefield EPS has also produced a parent information booklet that can support this process.

Sensitively collecting background information, parent's views and information about the current situation can be collated in an initial meeting. See Appendix 3.7 of the Appendix & Resource Pack for suggestions of questions and areas to cover. It is helpful for schools to identify a member of staff as a key point of contact who will be able to communicate regularly with parents and to agree how and when this communication will take place.

Gathering information from school staff

To build a full picture of the current situation, it's helpful to collect information from all school staff who work closely with the pupil. In a secondary school, this may involve seeking information from every subject teacher as well as other staff. The young person may show different strengths and difficulties across different subjects and in different environments, so it is beneficial to have a comprehensive view of them in various situations. See Appendix 3.9 of the Appendix & Resource Pack for an example of a form used to gather information from school staff (e.g. via email).
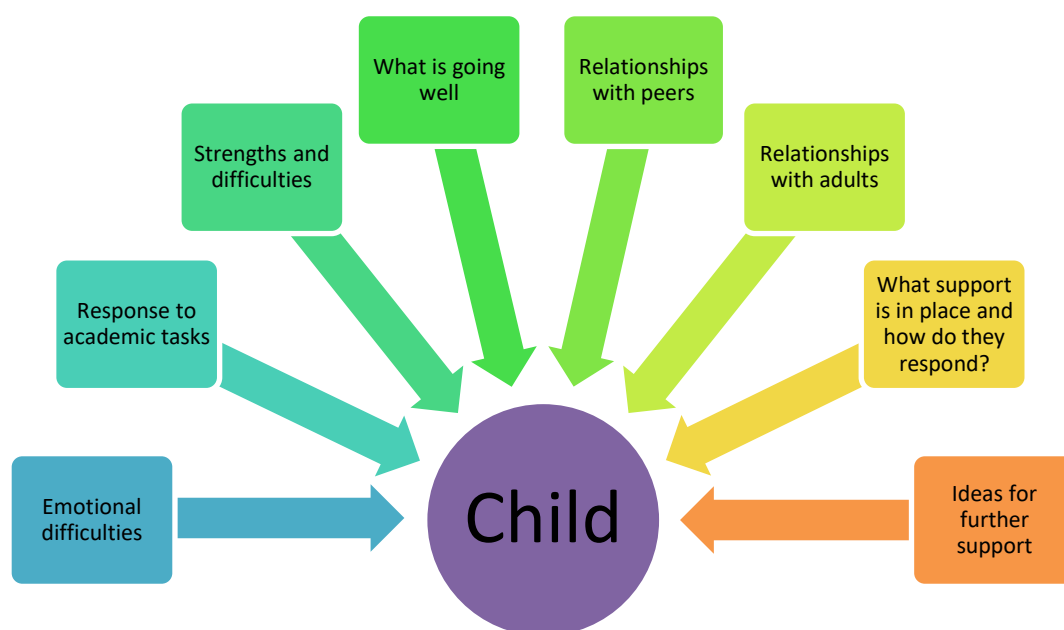

Figure 9: School staff information West Sussex guide p18

In addition to the above information, it is also important 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 school's special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO).

Chapter 5: Plan

Effective planning makes use of the assessment information gathered, including the view of the pupil and their family and the adults who know and support them. The aim is to obtain a shared understanding of the situation and a written plan of action to support the pupil's school attendance difficulties.

Formulation/Hypothesis

A psychological 'formulation' refers to summarising and making sense of a person's difficulties. It can be thought of as an evidence-based hypothesis. Formulations should take a holistic view of the presenting issues and how they relate to one another. This could include:

- Strengths
- Needs
- The context of a person's relationships
- Life events

The aim is to come up with a succinct formulation (one or two sentences) that describes the pupil's current situation. This is not always as easy as it sounds!!

The formulation/hypothesis should offer reasoning about why they are having difficulty attending school. It is helpful at this stage to consider which of the 4 functions (Kearney and Silverman) might be most relevant.

Appendix 4 of the Appendix & Resource Pack contains a useful formulation tool for use by school staff and includes additional questions to consider at each stage.

Action planning

Once a thorough assessment has been carried out and a pupil's absence from school is better understood, it is crucial to make a plan of action. This should be devised with involvement of all the key people, including parents/carers, a member of school staff with whom the pupil has a positive relationship and the pupil (at an age-appropriate level). It should be specific and **written down!!!**

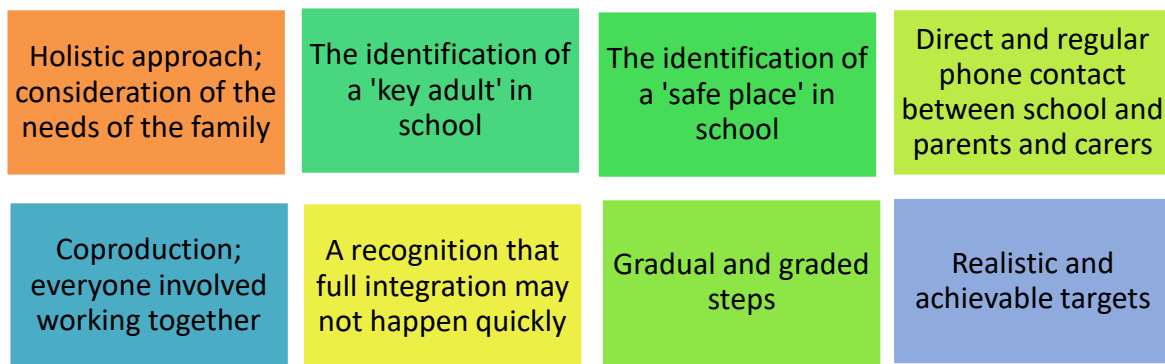Action planning for attendance difficulties should involve:
- Direct commination between parents/carers and school (it's also helpful to agree expectations regarding frequency and methods of contact going forward)
- If the pupil is not currently attending, an alternative daily routine, strategies for increasing engagement and a return to school at the earliest opportunity
- Home visits by school staff if needed

- A personalised programme of support strategies for the pupil (and interventions for parents/carers if needed)
- Setting of review dates – generally speaking, the more severe the attendance difficulty, the more often a plan needs to be reviewed
- Explicit methods for pupil to access 'key adult' and 'safe space' in school
- A way of ensuring all members of school staff (including office staff and any visiting teachers) are informed about the pupil's needs, objectives and support strategies

Attendance Support Plan

Features of an effective attendance support plan:

Holistic approach; consideration of the needs of the family	The identification of a 'key adult' in school	The identification of a 'safe place' in school	Direct and regular phone contact between school and parents and carers
Coproduction; everyone involved working together	A recognition that full integration may not happen quickly	Gradual and graded steps	Realistic and achievable targets

A temporary part-time timetable, or 'Phased Reintegration Plan' as they are called in Wakefield, may be necessary to support the young person's reintegration back to school full-time. However, all parties must agree that this is not a long-term solution and should work towards the outcome of a full return to school. The legal guidance we follow, stipulates that a Phased Reintegration plan must be a one-time strategy per academic year and not be repeated indefinitely. Information on the proforma to complete and where to send to the LA can be found from contacting the Wakefield School Exclusion Team for further information at exclusions@wakefield.gov.uk.

There will be times when a pupil may find the plan more challenging, such as at the start of its implementation, following a weekend, or a period of illness. If the pupil does not attend or carry out the agreed actions one day, start again the next day with an optimistic outlook. It's okay to be flexible, it might be necessary to move back a step in the plan to build greater confidence before moving forward.

Chapter 6: Do

Putting the attendance plan into action. Below are a number of suggested strategies for supporting various aspects of attendance difficulty and EBSA. Many of these approaches will already be familiar to school staff.

General Strategies

- Regular contact and communication between the pupil, family and school, including the use of video meetings and telephone check-ins.
- Ensuring any home learning is shared, marked and that feedback is provided so that the young person knows that they still belong and are a valued part of the school community.
- A focus on building the pupil's self-worth e.g. through giving roles of responsibility.
- Personalised timetable, including possible staggered start and end times to avoid potentially anxiety-provoking or overwhelming situations. It may be helpful to consider the quieter times during the day. Once the child feels more comfortable in the school building, gradual steps can be taken with the young person to build up their time in school
- Working with the child and family to create a 'Monday morning plan' which provides the best possible transition into school. If the child is able to attend school on a Monday, they are more likely to be successful at attending school later in the week. Many families start the plan on a Sunday evening to support the pupil in getting a good night's sleep.
- Ensuring a sense of normality and consistency when the young person is in school and avoid asking where they have been or emphasising that they've had time off.
- Identify key adult/s who can be available and accessible. There is a wealth of evidence demonstrating the benefits of an emotionally supportive teacher-child relationship.
- A warm, friendly and well-planned arrival and welcome to school. If children are anxious, their first contact with school is very important. Support the pupil so that they experience a sense of welcome and belonging whenever they attend. Front line staff (such as the reception team) may be the first faces they see so ensure these staff are involved in the support plan and understand the importance of their role.
- Work with the pupil and family to ensure there is a plan in place for dropping off and arrival in to school; including what activities they will engage in and how the transition to school can be eased. Involve the young person, talk to them about how the start of the school day could be changed to reduce their worries and anxieties.
- Ensure that the pupil feels that their feelings around the difficulties in getting to school are believed by the adults around them.

Strategies to support worry and anxiety

- Enable readiness for learning. A pupil who is experiencing EBSA may arrive in a heightened state of anxiety and will need support to become calm enough to engage with learning. Some tips for how to manage anxiety on arrival are shared in the Anxiety Management tools in Appendix 5.4 of the Appendix & Resource Pack.

- Support the young person to learn about anxiety and ways to manage their own worries and anxieties. This may involve approaches underpinned by CBT principles (see Appendix 5.1) as well as exploring a range of other anxiety management tools (see Appendix 5.2 and 5.4). Involvement of parent / carers and school staff in this learning has been found to boost the effectiveness of an intervention
- Agree a signal for when the pupil feels overwhelmed in school. Work with them to help them recognise what happens in their body and agree a signal or a response, such as showing a card, which let the adults know how they are feeling.
- Consider a solution-focused approach which focuses on the future and the pupil's aspirations. There are many ways to do this including the Miracle Question activity (see Appendix5.3) for information about using the Miracle Question to ascertain a young person's view and to help them to find solutions to their problems).

Environmental Strategies

- Identify a safe space (for some young people, rooms such as the school library or a pastoral area can be less stigmatising than a learning support base).
- Regular opportunities for the young person to reset. Build in moments through a child's day when they can emotionally regulate and restore a sense of control and calm. Resetting activities could include a walk outside, mindfulness, colouring or listening to a song.
- A clear, predictable and consistent environment. Creating a sense of safety is important for all students and staff but is especially important for young people experiencing anxiety. Ensure the child knows what to expect, and when, throughout the day. A visual timetable or a first / then board can be useful to support this.
- Social stories® are often helpful for autistic pupils to increase understanding and reduce anxiety around a specific daily social situation (e.g. waiting in line).
- Use a sensory audit to consider whether adaptations to the environment would help reduce stress for a pupil.

Supporting the Young Person and their Family

- Tailoring the support and guidance offered to parent/carers to the individual needs of the family. Some parents may welcome training in implementing strategies to prevent the reinforcement of avoidance behaviours; others may be keen to learn more about relaxation techniques or establishing positive sleep and morning routines. Parents of children with ASD may benefit from support from the Wakefield Autism Support Project (WASP Wakefield Autism Support Project | KIDS). The Wakefield Children First Hubs can offer advice and guidance to parents through self-referral. Turning Point may also provide support (https://www.turning-point.co.uk/). The WeHeartCBT website offers resources for parents including a three session guide to help managing your child's worries; visit https://weheartcbt.com/for-parents
- Frequent home visits can be used to build positive relationships, teach anxiety management techniques or deliver an intervention matched to the young person's needs. Where home visits cannot take place regularly, links can still be maintained through

telephone conversations or video calls. (This will need to be considered in line with any Covid-19 working arrangements or any Safeguarding arrangements).

- Supporting the young person and their family to learn about healthy lifestyle behaviours, such as diet, exercise, sleep routine and environment and how these can contribute to emotional well-being.

Strategies for supporting pupils with ASD

It is key that adults supporting pupils with autism have an understanding of autism and are able to embed general good practice strategies into their day-to-day practice, such as by providing structure and routine, the use of visual supports and calm spaces. Factors that can influence levels of anxiety for PUPILS can be varied, multiple and complex, therefore adults need to work flexibly to identify and, in turn, support the needs of an individual. The Autism Education Trust has produced an example of a sensory audit which can be used as an assessment measure and can be found on the AET website.

A recent project, 'Barriers to Education' (by Spectrum Gaming, Bury EPS and Trafford EPS), advocates a three-step approach to meeting the needs of pupils with ASD and EBSA.

Step One: Supporting emotional wellbeing

The social and educational demands of school and sensory experiences most likely increase the levels of anxiety pupil with autism experience. It is therefore appropriate at the planning stage to consider the educational experiences of the pupils and if the anxiety they have experienced in relation to this has led to burnout. Where they are concerns regarding the emotional wellbeing of a pupils, the initial focus should be to support their positive wellbeing. This may involve key adults building rapport with the pupils, understanding their needs and experiences.

Step Two: Adapting the educational environment

Consideration should be given to the allocation of key supportive staff who have developed rapport with the pupils, as well as appropriate environmental adaptions relating to their specific needs, for example sensory differences prior to the development of any plan relating to their engagement in learning and access to educational environments. The image below outlines particular themes to consider and address when making the appropriate adaptions for autistic pupils.

Step Three: Challenge

Once the pupil has received support to promote positive emotional wellbeing through the provision of supportive staff and appropriate adaptations, it will be more appropriate to address the anxiety related to school. A collaborative small steps approach, inviting and advocating the views of PUPILS and their family is vital, which is regularly monitored and adjusted to take into account changes to the pupils's emotional wellbeing. Alongside a planned intervention focusing on developing their understanding of anxiety and strategies to

accept and manage difficult thoughts relating to their anxieties. See Appendix 5.5 of the Appendix & Resource Pack

EBSA AND AUTISM — EdPsychEd

AUTONOMY AND STUDENT VOICE
- Actively listen to students' views, opinions and ideas
- Involve students in decisions that affect them e.g. the school uniform policy, style of lessons, individual vs group work, how school is decorated, the lunch menu, the subjects they take
- Allow students some autonomy over their day e.g. use of an exit card or time in a separate space when students identify a need
- Encourage an environment where students can speak freely and feel comfortable asking for help by promoting open discussions and responding to their ideas without judgement
- Aim to reduce power imbalance between students and staff by valuing students' input and ideas
- Aim for fair and reasonable rules that take into consideration the views and needs of all students

THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT
- Consider the sensory needs of students including reducing the noise level, allowing use of a separate space and allowing students to leave lessons earlier to access quieter corridors
- Create opportunities for background music and adjustable lighting
- Consider adaptations to the school uniform to meet sensory needs
- Create separate calm rooms away from the classroom that are designed and decorated collaboratively with students
- Consider increased access to green space e.g. lessons outside
- Consider whether there are opportunities for students to have access to animals at school
  - Aim to create a bright, welcoming environment with students' work on display
  - Where possible, provide access to facilities and resources such as libraries, science laboratories and sporting

WHAT CAN SCHOOLS DO?

ADJUSTMENTS TO MEET INDIVIDUAL NEEDS
- Consider the purpose and amount of homework set for students
- Create opportunities for breaks throughout the day including using a separate calm room
- Consider sending work home if a student is absent without expectation for completion
- Consider the appropriateness of detentions and other consequences on a case-by-case basis
- Embed more creative, engaging, interactive lessons that actively involve students in their learning
- Ensure key information is clearly explained using visuals
- Check whether students have understood the task

STRONG RELATIONSHIPS
- Prioritise a relational approach across the school
- Ensure staff understand the value of positive relationships with students
- Avoid shouting, raised voices, using sarcasm or publicly questioning absence in front of others
- Ensure staff treat all students with respect and understanding
- Create opportunities for students to spend time with peers e.g. at break and lunch time and in group work and class discussions
- Ensure lessons are tailored to students' interests, to increase their motivation and ability to support one other with learning
- Facilitate conversations relating to difference to encourage tolerance and acceptance amongst students
- Ensure clear and reasonable boundaries are maintained by staff
- Staff to engage with training relating to SEN and ASC
- Avoid stereotyping, labelling or grouping autistic students together.

Higgins (2022)

Interventions based on the functional model

Support plans and interventions should be based on the outcomes of the assessment procedure (outlined above) and therefore should fit with the functional model and the identified hypothesis for that pupil.

Function 1: Avoidance of school-based stimuli that provoke negative emotions (e.g. anxiety)
If the function of a pupil's non-attendance is to avoid uncomfortable feelings brought on by something within school, interventions could involve the following:

- Psycho-education: teaching pupil about the nature and course of anxiety, normalising the stress responses, features of their own anxiety, bodily sensations linked to anxiety, the role of adrenalin and the 3Fs (fight, flight, freeze), the 'upstairs v downstairs' model of the brain, thoughts that are associated with anxiety

- Support the development of emotional literacy and anxiety-management skills e.g. deep (diaphragmatic) breathing, distraction, progressive muscle relaxation, positive self-talk. Teach these when the pupil is calm. Adults to model them across different situations. Remind pupil to use these when they begin to feel anxious.

- Gradual exposure techniques: pupils need to know about the 'anxiety cycle' and that avoiding a feared situation usually makes anxiety worse the next time that situations has to be faced.

- Mental health and wellbeing: in addition to strategies to manage anxiety 'in the moment' consideration should be given to general issues that impact emotional wellbeing e.g. sleep, diet, exercise.

Figure: Summary of key intervention areas for Function 1

Help pupils to understand their anxiety

Anxiety Management Techniques
See Appendix 12

Identify and reduce stressors within the school environment!

See Appendix 11a

F1. Avoidance of school-based stimuli that provoke negative emotions (e.g. anxiety)

See Appendix 11b

Teach self-regulation strategies

Suport gradual exposure (desensitisation)
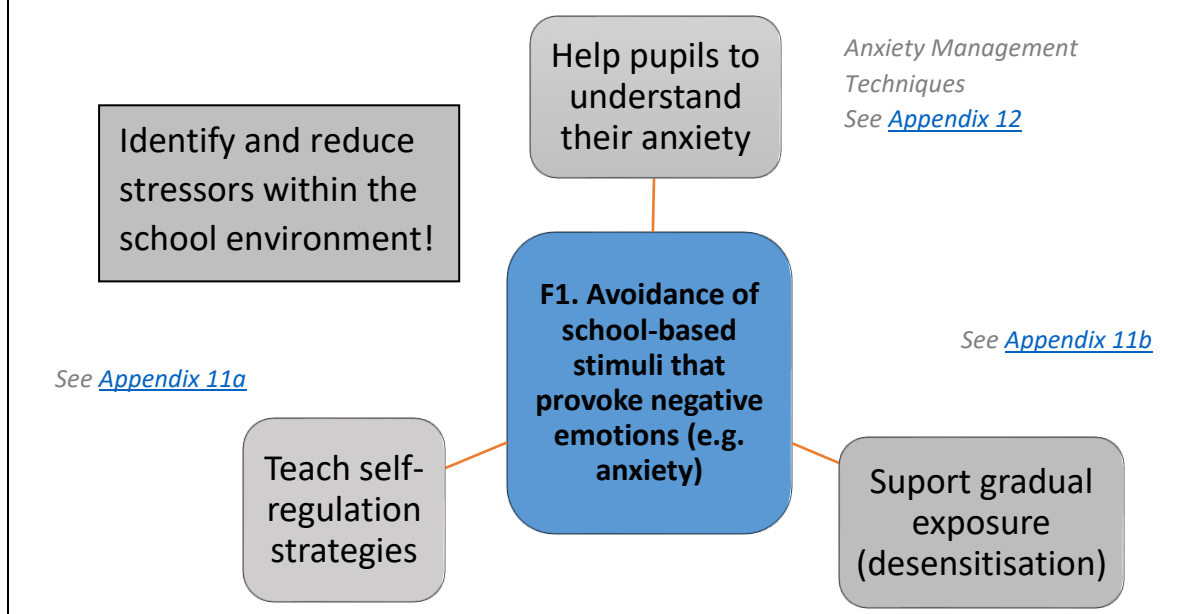
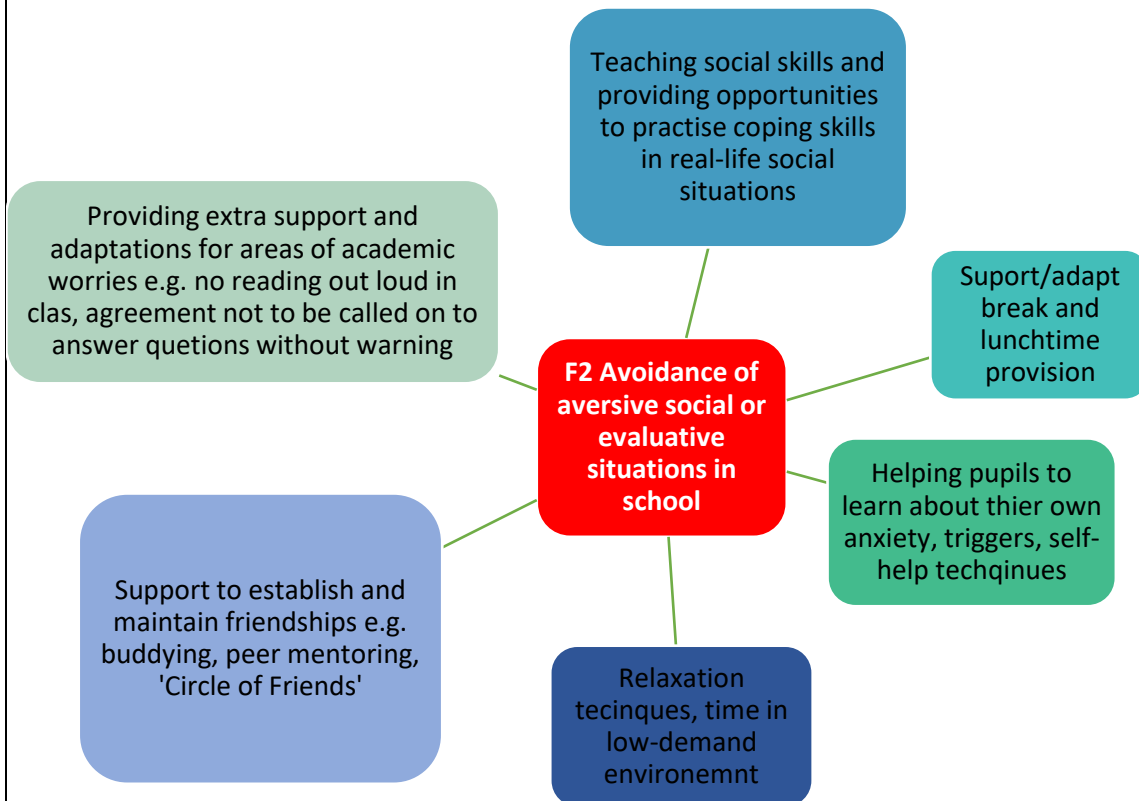**Function 2: Avoidance of aversive social or evaluative situations in school**

If a function of the child's behaviour for avoiding school is (academic demands, social pressures and/or aspects of the school environment), interventions could involve the following...

As with function 1 (above) interventions should include teaching about anxiety and how to manage it. Pupils may also need to be taught specific social skills and given

opportunities to practice coping skills in real-life situations, starting small and building up to those which are most challenging for them.

Figure: Summary of key intervention areas for Function 2

Teaching social skills and providing opportunities to practise coping skills in real-life social situations

Providing extra support and adaptations for areas of academic worries e.g. no reading out loud in clas, agreement not to be called on to answer quetions without warning

Suport/adapt break and lunchtime provision

F2 Avoidance of aversive social or evaluative situations in school

Helping pupils to learn about thier own anxiety, triggers, self-help techqinues

Support to establish and maintain friendships e.g. buddying, peer mentoring, 'Circle of Friends'

Relaxation tecinques, time in low-demand environemnt

Function 3: Pursuit of attention from significant others at home

If a function of the pupil's behaviours for avoiding school is to reduce separation anxiety or to gain attention from significant others (parents or family members), additional interventions could involve the following….

Working with parents/carers to:
- establishing morning routines
- respond to the behaviours which communicate stress/distress or physical/somatic complaint (e.g. tantrums and feeling sick)
- develop problem-solving techniques
- scripts for school drop off – keep these brief and positive
- positive and individual time to spend with the child outside school hours (e.g. child-led play or their choice of activity)

Techniques for helping pupils feel safe and connected whilst at school include:
- 'timetables' for pupil and parents, showing what both are doing during the day
- transitional objects (e.g. parent leaves a small personal item for pupil to keep safe)
- use of temporary 'tattoos' on child and parent - a visual representation of 'connectedness' and the fact that both will be thinking of each other during the day

The *Invisible String* by Patrice Karst maybe helpful (available to buy from usual retailers).

Figure: key areas of inervnetion for funtion 3

## Function 4: Pursuit of tangible reinforcement or reward outside of school

If a function of the pupil's behaviour for avoiding school is to pursue tangible 'reinforcers' outside of school, interventions could involve the following...

- Consider should be given to any underlying needs which may have initially caused or contributed to attendance difficulties, such as those identified through assessment of Risk & Protective Factors - has something changed for the pupil at home, school or peer group?
- Check whether there are any obvious barriers to being in school (such as bullying).
- Make school as stimulating as possible; find out the pupil's areas of interest and apply these to work tasks and extra-curricular opportunities as much as possible
- Increase "rewards" for attendance and disincentives for non-attendance (this could involve access to internet, phone credit, time with friends)
- If possible, remove access to the more stimulating activity (e.g. computer games) during school hours
- Teach the pupil how to disengage from inappropriate offers from peers – see below for more detail
- Support the pupil in traveling to and from school – see below for more details
- Activities to explore and shift the pupil's self-perceptions and/or self-esteem and to teach and build resilience
- **Motivational Interviewing**: this is a solution-oriented approach which can be particularly useful with older pupils who are feeling demotivated/disaffected by school (staff training may be required, speak to school link EP)

It may also be appropriate to seek support from outside agencies such as the Youth Offending Service for some cases (e.g. where a young person is at risk of or has already become involved in criminal behaviours).

Adapting the school experience

- Why is the pupil seeking reinforcement outside of school?
- Is there an unmet SEN (e.g. literacy or language difficulties)?
- Are there social communication difficulties or peer conflicts that need addressing?
- Is the pupil experiencing mental health difficulties?
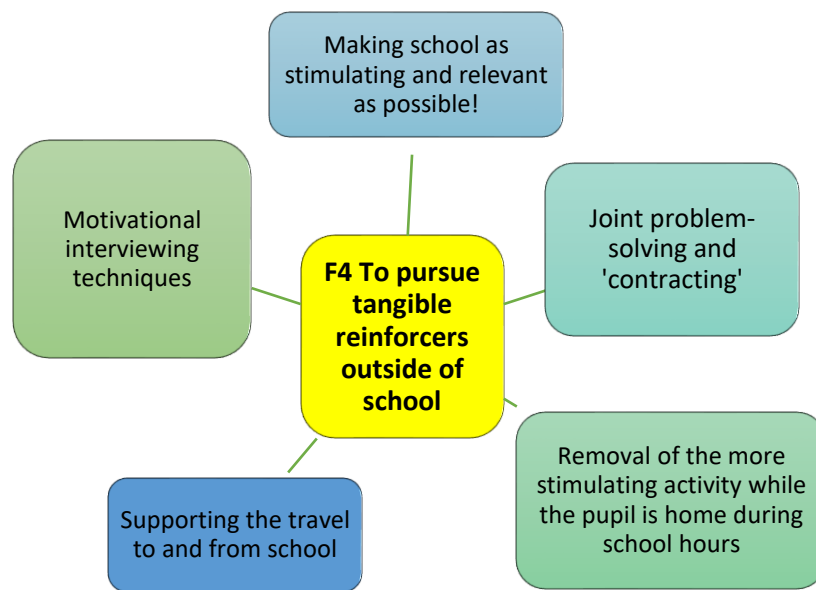
Strategies from *School Refusal Behaviour in Youth (Kearney, 2001):*

Emphasis on family work – structured process helping family members with conflict resolution, problem solving, contracting (etc). Goal is to change problematic interactions and dynamics which lead to the attendance difficulties.

Family meetings – initially with facilitation from a professional, then encourage family to have short weekly meetings themselves at home (e.g. 20 minutes) where each person gets equal chance to speak (stick to simple statement about issues and attempting to problem solve where appropriate).

Contracting – focus on a 'problem' that everyone agrees needs addressing (practice on something small before contracting on school attendance), define it, generate 5-10 possible solutions, rank them in terms of practicality/agreeableness. Emphasise good faith negotiations and compromise! Chose an acceptable solution to try out for a few days. All parties agree on timelines, roles, rewards, sanctions (etc) and write it all down. Display the contract somewhere prominent in the home.

Once a simple contracting process has been successfully negotiated, the family can work on a school attendance contract, with involvement from a key member of staff. This could focus on morning routine, partial school attendance, completing academic work at home etc. Enabling a child to earn rewards for home-based chores can be helpful in teaching them to comply with contracting. Contracts must be regularly reviewed e.g. weekly. Full time attendance doesn't necessarily have to pursued immediately.

Contracts must comply with the family's value system and resources available. Tangible rewards can work well in these cases via contracting i.e. pupil attends school for agreed lessons, in exchange for privileges such as extended curfew, more pocket money, release from chores, extra gaming time (etc). Contracts should be reviewed and updated/new ones

devised for as long as the attendance difficulties persist (with longer time between reviews, as attendance increases).

Problems that might also need addressing – sleep, peer influence, frustration with the contract.

Communication skills training – can be useful to address problematic interactions and to enhance the contracting process. The goal to is for the pupil to be able to have constructive conversations with the key people in their life.

Skills to practice could include active listening, turn-taking in conversation, engaging with another person's choice of topic. Support the pupil (with their parents if possible/appropriate) to listen to a statement from another person and have a go at repeating or paraphrasing it back (to show that they have heard and understood). Develop this into longer exchanges, aiming for conversation to be non-acrimonious. Role play could be used with a member of school staff or friend 'playing' another key person. Think about body language, tone/volume of voice, humour/sarcasm (etc).

Peer refusal training – a useful skills to combat 'peer pressure'. Similar to communication skills training, this typically involves modelling and role play. Begin by asking the pupil to describe in detail what happens and what their peers say that leads to them not attending school. Help them come up with several 'scripts' to firmly but appropriately refuse the offer of leaving/not attending school. In addition, think about other strategies such as changing routines to avoid the 'temptation' in the first place e.g. walking a different route to school. The key is to help the pupil implement this in reality without suffering ridicule or rejection.
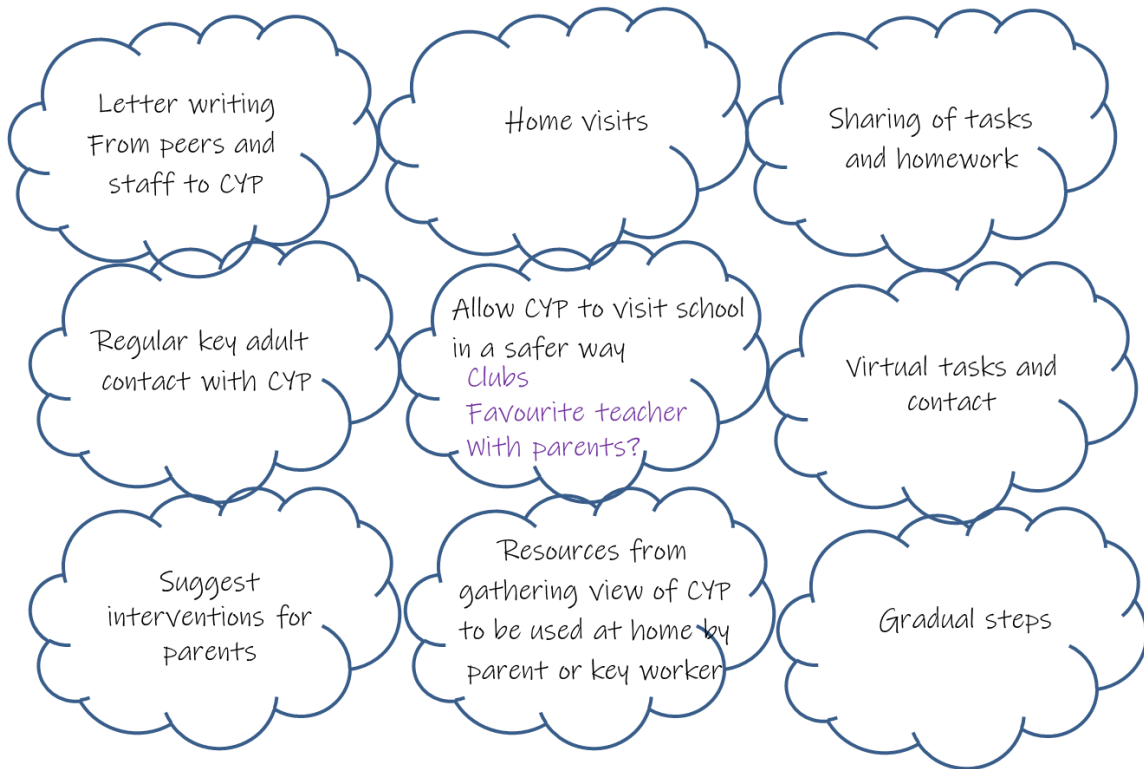
Escorting (to school/lessons) – peer pressure and the proximity of fun activities outside of school can prevent pupils from following agreed contracts and getting into school. It is sometimes necessary to have guidance from a familiar adult or positive role model in escorting a pupil from home to school and perhaps between lessons. In some cases, there may need to be a plan for if the pupil runs away from their escort. This is, of course, extremely time consuming and only a short-term solution. The escorting should be gradually reduced once success is seen. School staff should provide handover support where needed e.g. a key adult to 'meet and greet' pupil upon entry into school. Carefully consideration must be given to all of the pupil's experiences in school, as well as the practicalities of moving around the building.

Strategies if the pupil is not attending school at all

By following the approaches outlined to help with both the identification and early support of children at risk of EBSA, it is hoped that many young person will be supported to return to full time school before the school avoidance behaviour becomes entrenched.

However, it may be that in some cases, the young person continues to struggle to attend school over a longer period and will require a more flexible approach to their support and

interventions. Where possible, it is important to maintain links and a sense of connection and belonging with the child and family. This can be achieved through:

Letter writing From peers and staff to CYP

Home visits

Sharing of tasks and homework

Regular key adult contact with CYP

Allow CYP to visit school in a safer way
Clubs
Favourite teacher
With parents?

Virtual tasks and contact

Suggest interventions for parents

Resources from gathering view of CYP to be used at home by parent or key worker

Gradual steps

Chapter 7: Review

It is helpful to have realistic expectations; school avoidance is unlikely to be fixed overnight or by a single person. Celebrate successes no matter how small and look to making those gradual changes if the issue seems stuck.

With complex cases, support is available from other agencies such as CAMHS, the Educational Psychology Service, WISENDSS and others seen in the resources section below.

Reviewing your approaches at all levels as regularly as you are able to will help you to revise and develop your support. You may have made changes to **whole school** approaches so a check in with your audit might be advisable at this stage. Looking with the **young person** at their anxiety levels assessed through scaling or another assessment method could be a rewarding way of measuring progress or simply a pointer to adapt a plan or intervention. Differences in responses on individual items on an assessment measure before and after intervention may indicate positive change.

Review of plans

The attendance support plan should be regularly reviewed with input from the pupil, parents and key staff and other professionals. Dates for the review should be set during the action planning stage.

The review is an opportunity to monitor and celebrate progress made towards the outcomes, consider any new information or changes to the situation and plan next steps. Plans may need maintaining or adapting to incorporate new outcomes or actions. The review is also an opportunity to identify if there needs to be further consultation with, or referrals to other agencies.

When the situation is positive and the young person is attending the times or activities agreed, it is important to follow the gradual steps outlined in the action plan. It may be tempting to skip a stage or increase expectations of attendance; however, this may not be helpful and could impact on the sense of trust the young person has with the school.

EBSA Support Cycle

Roles and responsibilities

Any of the following might become involved in supporting a pupil who has school attendance difficulties. It is important that there is a shared understanding in school (which is also clearly communicated with parents) about who has what role (adapted from Essex County Council, 2023).

Role	Possible involvement/responsibilities
Form Tutor/Teacher (Secondary)	Regular contact – identification, providing assessment information, prevention, monitoring and intervention
Class Teacher (Primary)	Daily contact – identification, providing assessment information, prevention, monitoring and intervention
SENCo	Overview of case, may be involved in gathering assessment information and planning/monitoring interventions, might be the link to outside agency support
School Attendance Lead	School attendance procedures, risk assessment, response to early concern, monitoring attendance data, meeting with parents
Pastoral Lead (e.g. Head of Year or Deputy Head Teacher)	Systemic pastoral issues, response to early concern, monitoring attendance data, meeting with pupil/parents
Learning Support Assistant	Regular contact within lessons and/or delivering more targeted interventions
School Nurse	May give advice on medical issues, signpost to other relevant services

Educational Psychologist	Can support school systemically and with individual cases where staff feel more specialist knowledge is required to assess need and/or devise support plan
WISENDSS	May become involved with a child/young person following a planning meeting. They offer advice, via consultation, and/ or assessment working collaboratively with key school staff to deliver targeted interventions to support individual pupils.
CAMHS	May become involved in supporting higher level mental health needs
EWS	Work in partnership with schools and parents/carers to assist and support the integration of pupils into education by planning appropriate action to help them overcome their difficulties with school attendance.

Key Adult

Essex County Council (2023) identified a number of attributes and skills considered crucial when working with anyone who has any emotional wellbeing and/or mental health need, including those related to difficulties with school attendance.

Attributes
- Be open and honest; provide connection and a sense of belonging
- Be empathic and show warmth; show kindness
- Be non-judgmental and curious about the child/young person; show compassion
- Be self-aware and have the capacity to self–develop
- Have integrity and be willing to think ethically, professionally and personally
- Be flexible
- Able to avoid assumptions or prejudice
- Be an advocate for the child; demonstrate hope
- Be able to create their own 'filter' and understand demonstrated behaviour is communication and isn't personal to them

Emotional Literacy Skills
- Be able to self-reflect
- Willing to be open to being challenged
- Identify their own personal levels of competence and if they feel they aren't competent at something to seek and ask for advice
- To have the ability to recognise when they need to look after their own emotional wellbeing and reflect on this
- To understand confidentiality and be mindful of this
- To have the ability to accept the child unconditionally
- Have the confidence to safely and fairly challenge

Therapeutic Skills
- Listening and attending, being present and congruent for the child
- Having the ability to paraphrase – reflect back what the child says
- Summarise a conversation and put it into context for the child
- Ask open questions

- Accept the child/young person's words with acknowledgement and avoid communicating any judgment of their words
- Encourage the child/young person to reflect on their feelings and remark on any steps they have taken towards their goals in a calm relaxed way
- Help the child/young person to focus on the key issue, rather than bombard them with too much information or instruction
- Challenge appropriately when needed
- Manage silence effectively to allow the child/young person time to think/be thought about
- Recognise the child/young person's strengths, highlight these and encourage them to use the skills needed to succeed
- Recognise transference: when feelings, desires, anxieties and expectations are redirected from the child/young person and applied to the supporting adult. i.e. The child/young person tells the adult, 'now look what you've made me do' … the child redirects their feelings of anxiety, frustration and fear onto the supporting adult

Support and Further Reading

Educational Psychology Service

The Educational Psychology Service (EPS) is part of Wakefield Council. They work with individuals and groups of children, teachers, parents/carers and other agencies who may be involved with a child and their family, across a range of settings. The Educational Psychologist (EP) supports schools to develop their practices for inclusion and enable the school to meet the needs of pupils with complex needs, including those with Special Educational Needs (SEN).

Phone 01924 307 403   Email eps@wakefield.gov.uk

Web: Educational Psychology Service (mylocaloffer.org)

Wakefield Inclusion & Special Educational Needs/Disabilities Support Services

Wakefield Inclusion and Special Educational Needs Support Service is a service for educational settings that offers advice and training to schools within Wakefield Authority.

We are committed to offering support and training at an individual or whole school level in the areas of Autism, Speech Language and Communication Needs (SLCN) SEMH and Learning Support.
- We provide a team of Inclusion teachers with individual areas of specialisms
- We offer an extensive support package from consultation and assessment to collaborative working with key school staff to deliver targeted interventions to support individual pupils.
- Bespoke training to school staff to develop and enhance good inclusive practice.

SEND Inclusion Advisory Teachers from what were CIAT, SEMH and LSS teams have been aligned to one of the larger Clusters:
1. Castleford and Airedale and Pontefract and Knottingley;
2. Normanton and Featherstone and South East
3. Wakefield Central and North West and South West.

Within each team there is a balance across each of the areas in terms of the specialisms. We are committed to offering support and training at an individual or whole school level in the areas of Autism, Speech Language and Communication Needs (SLCN) Behaviour and Emotional regulation and Learning Support.

Support from our service can be accessed through:
- Named SENSS Single point of contact – schools are aware of their link advisory teacher.
- Direct contact through our mailbox senss@wakefield.gov.uk
- Telephone 01924 303660

The Education Welfare Service (EWS)

The Education Welfare Service (EWS) is based in Normanton Town Hall. The role of an Education Welfare Officer is to advise parents/carers of their responsibilities and promote regular school attendance.

We work in partnership with schools to assist and support the integration of pupils into education by planning appropriate action to help them overcome their difficulties with school attendance.

The EWS will make appropriate contact with parents and young people and assess circumstances which have led to the breakdown of school attendance. Working with schools, parents/carers and other agencies to improve outcomes across a range of settings.

The EWS also advise and guide parents/carers in interpreting Admissions, EHE provision, Children Missing Education and Child Employment

Phone 01924 307413 / 307451

E mail - ews@wakefield.gov.uk

educationcme@wakefield.gov.uk

ehe@wakefield.gov.uk

The Wakefield School Exclusions Team (SET)

The School Exclusion Team (SET) is based at Normanton Town Hall. We are the Local Authority's team that advises on exclusion from schools. We make sure that the government's exclusion guidance is followed to minimise disruption to a pupil's education.

We advise school staff, parents or carers, governors, professionals and others seeking support on the exclusion process. We support schools to use alternatives to exclusion and work in partnership with other services. We provide training to all involved in the exclusion process.

We also monitor all exclusions from maintained schools and academies in our district to produce data for reporting purposes to the government and Ofsted.

We provide an 'Exclusions Helpline' 5 days a week.

Phone: 01924 307319

E mail: exclusions@wakefield.gov.uk

Children First Hubs

The Children First Hubs work with families or young people who would like some extra support to deal with a difficult situation. Getting help early can stop things from getting worse and becoming harder to manage.

Children First Hubs will work alongside the professionals already involved with your family and can offer short term co-ordinated packages of support for a range of issues including:

- Family relationships
- Behaviours that are challenging
- School attendance
- Emotional and mental health
- Domestic abuse
- Parental conflict
- Housing issues
- Employment and debt problems

Castleford & Airedale:

Tel: 01977 724350
Email: cfhnortheast@wakefield.gov.uk

Pontefract & Knottingley:

Tel: 01977 724350
Email: cfhponteknottingley@wakefield.gov.uk

Normanton & Featherstone

Tel: 01924 307878
Email: cfhwakefieldwest@wakefield.gov.uk

South East:

Tel: 01977 722305
Email: cfhsoutheast@wakefield.gov.uk

South West:

Tel: 01924 303181
Email: cfhsouthwest@wakefield.gov.uk

Central:

Tel: 01924 303272
Email: cfhwakefieldwest@wakefield.gov.uk

Wakefield Virtual School

Children in Care and previously looked-after children start with the disadvantage of their pre-care experiences and, often, have special educational needs. The Virtual School Head and associated duties are a statutory function of a local authority and has a key role to ensure these children have the maximum opportunity to reach their full educational potential.

The duties are wide ranging and include:

- Raising the educational experiences, aspirations and outcomes of Children in Care
- Ensuring that the educational attainment and progress of CiC are monitored and evaluated as if these children attend a single school
- Ensuring the attainment and achievement gap is closing (compared with National Statistics)
- Ensuring the robust allocation and monitoring of Pupil Premium Plus to schools to improve the attainment of CiC and close the attainment gap between them and their peers
- Supporting and monitoring the completion of high quality PEPs that focus on educational outcomes
- Providing training, support & development to all corporate parents and key stakeholders
- Providing advice to parents and guardians of previously looked after children in order to support their effective advocacy

Contact: virtualschool@wakefield.gov.uk

CAMHS – Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service

The CAMHS team works with children and young people with a range of difficulties that seriously impact on PUPILS's mental health and emotional well-being.

Direct referrals to the Community CAMHS teams are accepted from GPs, qualified social workers, educational psychologists and paediatricians. Health visitors and school nurses may refer with explicit agreement of the GP.

Tel: Wakefield CAMHS SPA team: 01977 735865

Website **www.southwestyorkshire.nhs.uk/camhs-wakefield**

Wakefield Early Support Advice Information and Liaison (WESAIL)

Wakefield Early Support, Advice, Information and Liaison (WESAIL) service provides a free, confidential and impartial support to children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), and their parents and carers.

WESAIL provide information, advice, support and signposting according to need by either by telephone or where needed on an individual or targeted basis or through events and workshops. We aim to provide easy-to-understand information to raise

awareness of the options available to those using our service, and support people in making informed decisions about these options.

We offer information and guidance about:

- The law on special educational needs and disability
- Education, health and care plans and the procedures surrounding them
- Personalisation and personal budgets
- The Local Offer – sharing information about the services, activities and support available in the local Wakefield area
- Managing mediation, tribunals, appeals, exclusions and complaints
- SEND support in early years provision, mainstream schools and post-16 institutions
- Local provision in mainstream, resourced mainstream and special schools
- Where to go for additional support locally or nationally
- What to do when things go wrong

We collaborate with parents, carers and young people to co-produce our resources. We also provide volunteering opportunities for those looking to increase their involvement with the service.

You can contact Wakefield WESAIL SENDIASS Monday to Friday, between 9:00am and 5:00pm.

Telephone: 01924 965588
Email: wesail@family-action.org.uk
Website: Find us on Facebook
Address: Family Action WESAIL, Suite 6, Orion Office Express, Benton Office Park, Bennett Avenue, Horbury Wakefield WF4 5RA

Further Support & Recommended Reading

Anxiety UK

Information and resources for parents of children who are experiencing anxiety.

www.anxietyuk.org.uk

WeHeartCBT

A collection of resources aimed at helping PUPILS who are struggling with anxiety and/or low mood. Resources are based on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and aimed at mental health professionals, schools and families.

www.weheartcbt.com/anxiety

Young Minds

Information, advice and publications on mental health with detailed sections on anxiety for young people, parents/carers and professionals. Includes a parent survival guide and monthly live parents lounge sessions with mental health professionals.

www.youngminds.org.uk

Not Fine in School

A parent-led organisation supporting families experiencing school refusal and attendance difficulties along with raising awareness of related issues. Lots of videos and support as well as guides for schools and families.

https://notfineinschool.org.uk/

MindEd

Some free online courses on how to support young people with mental health difficulties.

https://www.minded.org.uk/

MindEd for Families

Online advice and information to help you to understand and identify early signs and best support your child.

https://mindedforfamilies.org.uk/

Recommended reading

- *Think Good Feel Good: A Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Workbook for Children and Young People*. Stallard, P. (2018)
- *Thinking Good, Feeling Better: A Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Workbook for Adolescents.* Stallard, P. (2018)
- *The Homunculi Approach to Social and Emotional Wellbeing: A Flexible CBT Programme for Young people on the Autism Spectrum or with Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties.* Greig, A. & Mackay, T. (2013)
- *Starving the Anxiety Gremlin: A Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Workbooks on Anxiety Management for Yong People.* Collins-Donnelly, K. (2013).
- *Starving the Anxiety Gremlin for Children aged 5-9: A Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Workbook People.* Collins-Donnelly, K. (2014).
- *The Zones of Regulation.* Kuypers, L. (2021).
- *Dealing with Feeling.* Rae, T. (2007)
- *Anxiety: Cognitive Behaviour Therapy with Children and Young People (CBT with Children, Adolescents and Families)*. Stallard, P. (2008).
- *What About Me?: Inclusive Strategies to Support Pupils with Attachment Difficulties Make it Through the School Day.* Bomber, L. (2011).
- *A Volcano in My Tummy: Helping Children to Handle Anger: A Resource Book for Parents, Caregivers and Teachers.* Whitehouse, E. & Pudney, W. (1998)

- [Keeping children safe in education 2023 (publishing.service.gov.uk)](#) DfE Guidance for Schools (expected to be updated 1st September 2023)
- *The Selective Mutism Resource Manual* (Maggie Johnson and Alison Wintgens)
- *Understanding School Refusal: A Handbook for Professionals in Education, Health and Social Care*. Thambirajah, M.S, Grandison, J. & De-Hayes, L. (2008)
- *Understanding & Supporting Children & Young People with Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA).* Rae, T. (2020)
- *School Leader's Guide to Tackling Attendance Challenges.* Sprick, J. & Sprick, R. (2018)
- *Managing School Attendance: Successful intervention strategies for reducing truancy.* Reid, K. (2013)
- *Mental Health and Attendance at School.* Finning, K., Ford, T. & Moore, D. (2022)