

EMOTIONALLY BASED SCHOOL AVOIDANCE (EBSA)



A GUIDE FOR PRIMARY AND
SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Herefordshire
Educational Psychology Service
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Introduction

This guide has been produced by the Herefordshire Educational Psychology Service.

The aims of the guide are:

- to support schools to develop their understanding and knowledge of Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA). EBSA is also known as 'school phobia', 'school refusal', 'school anxiety' or 'school non-attendance'.
- to understand the risk factors for EBSA
- to help recognise the warning signs of EBSA
- to understand the implications and impacts EBSA can have on a young person and their families
- to provide helpful strategies for school to use to support young people to consistently attend.

**** For the purpose of this booklet, all children between the ages of 4-16 will be referred to as young people****

Background

What is Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA)?

EBSA can be used to describe the refusal of young people to attend school for long periods of time based on emotional factors. EBSA is not a mental health difficulty but rather a combination of lots of different factors. There are a range of different reasons a young person does not want to attend school. The combination of factors differs for each individual and there is no single cause.

EBSA is different from truanting or 'wilful' non-attendance as there is often an underlying presence of anxiety and/or emotional upset and no significant anti-social behaviour. Parents/carers and family members are, usually, aware of the young person's absence from school.

Prevalence

In the UK, EBSA affects approximately 1-2% of the school population; although, some researchers suggest it could be as high as 5%. It is important to note, however, that EBSA is difficult to measure accurately as some young people have extended periods of non-attendance whereas for other young people, periods of non-attendance are more sporadic and inconsistent - missing odd days and lessons. The latter pattern of non-attendance is harder to recognise as EBSA.

- EBSA is present in all settings but is usually more prevalent in secondary schools
- EBSA is equally prevalent in males and females
- EBSA may be sudden or gradual
- EBSA is more common in adolescence.

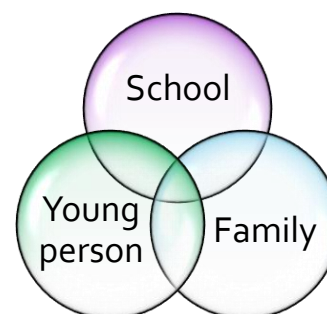
Causes

Although there is no one specific cause for EBSA, there are contributing, complex and interlinked factors as to why a young person finds it difficult to attend school. These could be:

- To avoid uncomfortable feelings which are escalated by attending school. These feelings may include heightened anxiety and low mood.
- To avoid stressful school situations, e.g., elements of the school environment, academic and/or social pressures.
- To avoid separating from parents/carers or other family members.
- To take part in things outside of school which are deemed more important by the young person. For example, playing computer games.

Risk, Protective and Resilience Factors

There are a number of **risk factors** which increase, and contribute to, the vulnerability of young people avoiding school. These are unique to each young person, but the following table may be useful to think about in terms of the school, young person and family.



School	Young person	Family
Bullying	Reluctance or difficulty with social interaction	Change in family dynamic (divorce, separation, etc)
Difficulty in one or more specific subjects	Fear of failure	Loss and bereavement
Transition between schools or year groups	Low self confidence	High level of stress within family
Change of school	Physical illness	Highly protective or anxious parenting style
Structure of the school day	Special Educational Need/s	Family history of EBSA
Academic pressures (exams)	Separation anxiety	Physical and mental health well-being of parents
Peer and/or staff relationships	Traumatic events	Young carer

Even if a young person does have a number of these risk factors, they can also have a number of protective factors which decrease the vulnerability of them avoiding school.

Protective factors include:

- A secure and stable home life
- Loving parent(s)
- Positive teacher-pupil relationship
- Family involvement in school life
- Additional academic support in school
- School transition policy
- Social and emotional support in school

Resilience refers to a person's ability to cope with environmental difficulties without experiencing negative effects. Some **resilience factors** that might help a young person manage risk factors are:

- Being empathetic towards others
- Independence
- Asking for support when needed
- A general interest in school
- Being responsible
- Being able to show initiative
- Having the ability to problem solve
- Good sleeping and eating patterns

Warning Signs and Triggers

There are two components in the identification of EBSA. These are:

1. A pattern of non-attendance
2. Anxiety which presents in strong feelings of avoidance of going to school.

Some **warning signs** leading to EBSA might be:

- Less engagement in lessons
- Speaking negatively about school
- Changes in behaviour
- Presenting as more anxious
- Crying
- Pleading to go home
- Difficulty separating from parents or carers at the start of the school day
- Refusing to go into certain lessons

Although it is unlikely, a young person may not present any of these warning signs before avoiding school.

Common Triggers for EBSA

Transition

Exams

Change of friendship
groups

Loss or bereavement in
family

Bullying

Prolonged illness

Anxiety and EBSA

EBSA is often underpinned by high anxiety. This may not be apparent to the adults who know the young person well. When anxiety is linked to school avoidance, the young person experiences anxious thoughts around attending school. They may also be fearful that they cannot cope in school.

Four overarching areas can be used to describe the symptoms of anxiety:

Emotional: overwhelming feelings of fear, anger, sadness, shame, guilt.

Physical: physiological symptoms such as vomiting, nausea, shaking, sweating, dry mouth and needing to go to the toilet.

Cognitive: anxious thoughts – these could include detailed mental pictures of an awful event or could be a thought of not feeling good enough or inability to cope in school.

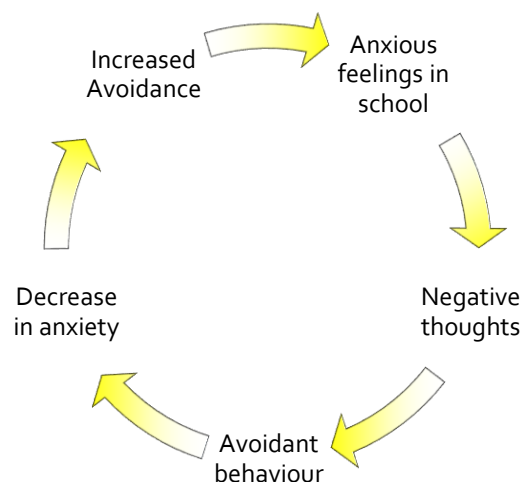
Behavioural: refusing to speak, running away or perhaps self-harm.

To avoid anxiety a young person may withdraw from the situation and avoid going to school altogether. This could start by refusing to get ready for school or not wanting to leave the house in the morning.

EBSA can be seen as a cycle of anxious thoughts and feelings which build and strengthen, making it harder to break. The earlier that help and support is available for the young person the more likely the cycle will weaken and re-engagement in school will occur. Early intervention where possible is therefore important.

This is what the cycle may look like if a young person is showing anxious behaviours.

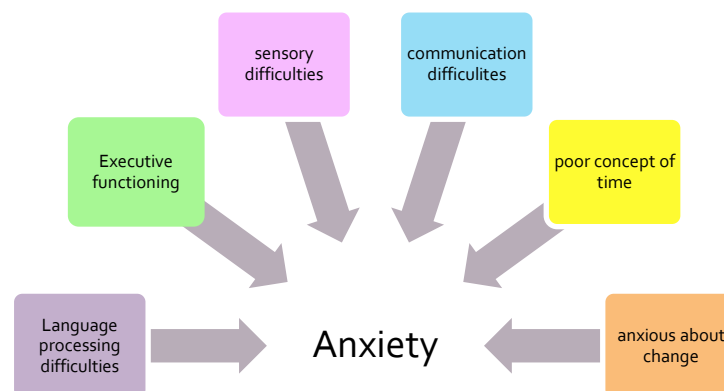
(Adapted from West Sussex Educational Psychology Service)



Autism and EBSA

High levels of anxiety are particularly common in young people with autism. Although there is little research showing the prevalence of young people with autism and EBSA, evidence does suggest those with autism usually have increased anxiety so could be more at risk of EBSA.

There are a number of factors that influence anxiety, particularly in those with autism. This is shown in the diagram below.



(Adapted from West Sussex Educational Psychology Service)

Schools are complex, sometimes unpredictable social environments which young people with autism can find particularly difficult. Young people with autism use lots of energy managing social experiences which can be overwhelming and they can often become overloaded. School days, particularly in secondary school, change frequently - different lessons, teachers and classrooms. Transition between year groups and/or schools can be particularly challenging.

Interventions aimed at developing the young person's social skills, resilience, emotional literacy and regulation are essential.

When re-engaging a young person with autism back into education, it is useful to consider:

- Who will they see first?
- Which lesson/room will they go to first?
- How long they will be there?
- Why are they there?
- What will happen next?

EBSA in the context of COVID-19

Research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic by Oxford University found that a fifth of primary aged young people were afraid to leave the house, one fifth of secondary aged young people were worried they might catch coronavirus and two fifths of secondary aged young people were worried about the health of friends or family as a result of coronavirus. For some children, this level of anxiety about COVID-19 has persisted.

In addition, the widespread and sustained interruption to normal school attendance caused by the national lockdowns of 2020 and 2021 has resulted in higher levels of EBSA in the country as a whole. Some young people who avoid school, or who are at risk of higher levels of school focussed anxiety have become even more reluctant to attend following this. There are likely to be a number of reasons for this, including heightened anxiety about separating from a parent, increased levels of anxiety towards school after a long period of becoming used to staying at home, or worries about keeping up with school work after so long away. The thought of returning to school after having such a long break is highly anxiety-inducing for some young people but also for their parents.

There are a number of things to think about regarding this:

Preparation is key

- Keep in touch with parents to ensure they know what the plan is for returning to school. If parents are well informed, they can inform the young person. This keeps anxiety levels lower.
- Develop a social story in school to explain to young people what has happened. This would be particularly useful for primary aged young people, those with autism or those showing more anxiety than usual.
- If possible, prepare a short film to show pupils what school will look like when they return.

Focus on Psychosocial care

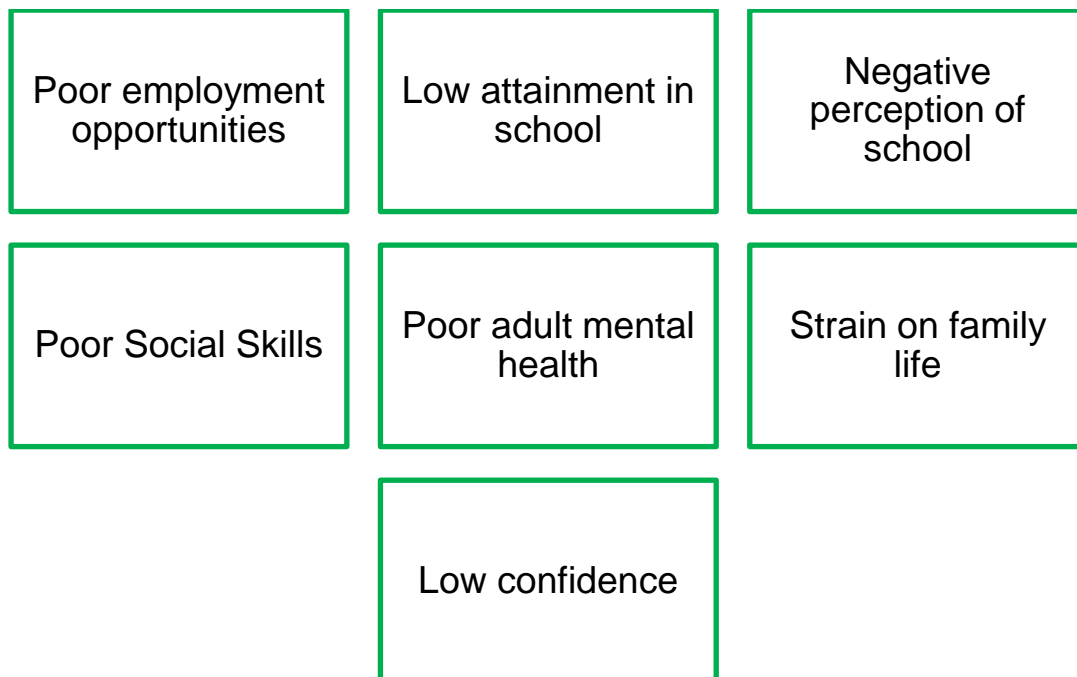
- Recovery curriculum – ensure there is a focus on social and emotional development and incorporating lessons on this.
- Social connectedness – focus on building relationships between staff and young people.
- A sense of calm – It is important to provide young people with extra support due to increased feelings of anxiety and other emotions. Normalising these feelings will create calmness.
- Promoting hope – young people need to be provided with reassurance that things will return to normal and get better in the future.

School routines

- Visual timetables ahead of the school week so young people feel prepared for the week.
- Have a plan in place for break/lunch times and what social distancing will mean. The idea of this could be anxiety inducing so it is important to consider this and communicate it with young people and their families.



Possible Impacts of EBSA



EBSA can impact a young person and their family in many different ways. It is important to be aware of these impacts when working with a young person and their families. Intervening and providing support as early as possible will reduce the likelihood of EBSA significantly affecting their life.

Strategies to Support Young People to Attend School

It is important to keep in mind that EBSA presents differently for all young people so some strategies may be more effective than others.

Work with the family

This is key. Initially, if the young person's attendance is low then school will have to communicate with the parents to explore why this is the case. Staff should be sensitive and be aware that the parents may feel they are being told off.

It is important to bear in mind that the issue of their young person avoiding school might have been going on for some time in a constant battle with their young person every morning to try and get them to go to school. Parents and family members will often be exhausted, stressed, worried and feel guilty.

It is important that families can build trust with staff members in school to enable honest and open communication. Staff will need to provide reassurance and an opportunity for the parents and family to talk. It could be useful to refer to other times where young people have gone through EBSA so that they do not feel alone.

How to get young people back into the school building?

- **Gradual steps** - this could include doing the journey to school but not going in or going into school when nobody is there.
- Find out what lessons or time of day the young person prefers and finds the easiest. It could be useful to give the young person the **option** to just attend this lesson/time of day initially. This could be break time, an art lesson or after school club. This may gradually lead to longer periods of time in school.
- Ensure to **keep contact** with the young person to maintain a positive relationship when they are not in school. This could be done via phone call, video call, text or message, email, a card, letter or a home visit.
- It is important to know how the young person would like to be **greeted** if and when they do return to school. Some young people may want to arrive unnoticed but for others they might want recognition

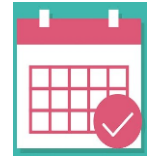


and to see that their teachers are pleased with them. It will be important to chat to the young person about this.

- When talking to a young person about not wanting to come to school it is important to **normalise** it, so they do not feel ashamed or different. Use phrases such as 'a previous student who I worked with said' or 'some students who have found it difficult to come to school...'.

Intervene Early

Noticing some of the warning signs and intervening early with additional support for the young person and their families decreases the risk of EBSA becoming a long-term issue.



Create a predictable, consistent environment

This is really important to help the young person feel physically and emotionally safe. This will help the young person know what to expect and when. The school day might have to change slightly for them.



How do we create this?

- Keep certain times of the day the same. For example, at the start of the day phonics could always be the first task and at the end of the day story time. It could be that at the beginning of Maths lesson, a warm-up exercise could be incorporated which is the same every lesson. This helps to create moments of predictability for the young person.
- It is important to think along with the young person or young person and adapt the environment based on their needs.
- Use visual timetables to reinforce routines, especially with primary aged young people.

Welcome the young person into school

It is important to show the young person, when they arrive at school, that you are delighted to see them. They should be greeted by caring and nurturing members of staff, who are the same every day, which can help to create a 'soft landing'.

A soft landing refers to the smooth transition into school in the morning and one where the young person feels less anxious about coming into school.

To create a soft landing, it is helpful to talk to the young person and the family to discuss the worries they have about coming to school in the morning and what would help them on their transition into school.

It can be useful to map out what the drop off at school looks like; who brings the young person in? How do they get to school? Who is the first person the young person sees? Do they see anyone?






Enable readiness for learning

Once the young person is in the school building, the next step is to get them ready to engage in learning.

This could be done through the SHARE IT, SHELF IT, SHOUT IT strategy.



- SHARE IT  – give the young person the opportunity to share how they are feeling by writing or drawing their thoughts in a thought journal. They could share this with an adult or keep it for themselves. Another option is to talk through how they feel with a trusted adult.
- SHELF IT  – explain to young person that for now worries are being put on a shelf so the focus can be on the lesson. By doing this the worries can be caught, named and tamed. This is a good opportunity for a trusted adult to make an appointment with the young person to enable them to express their worries later. Anxiety can be reduced for a young person by them knowing that an adult will be able to talk through their worries with them at a specific time.
- SHOUT IT  – this gives the young person the opportunity to get the worries OUT. This can be done through exercise (jumping jacks, skipping, running or stamping), drawing (young people can be creative in however they choose to get the worry out. A good idea for younger young people is by drawing a 'worry monster') or screaming into a cushion.

It is important here to give the young person the option of what they feel they want to do which will help them to engage in learning. By physically getting the worry out or shelving it for a time can help them get to a state of calmness and ready to learn.

Build in regular resets

It may be useful to have regular moments throughout the school day where a young person can continue to keep themselves calm so that they are in the right mindset to learn.

Examples of reset moments could be:

- Breathing activities
- Mindfulness
- Listening to music
- Going outside



Again, this is something that should be agreed with the young person so that it works for them. It doesn't have to be a long activity, maybe even just a few minutes at a time regularly throughout the day. Activities

might happen at specific times throughout the day – maybe before the start of every lesson. This helps to create that predictable, consistent environment which is so important for a young person.

These moments may need to be facilitated by an adult to make sure it happens or for older/more independent young people it might be something they'd like to do by themselves.

This is a **proactive** response which is built into a young person's school day and becomes an active part of their routine regardless of whether they are feeling anxious.

It should not be used as a **reactive** response.

Develop a signal for overwhelm

The young person can develop a signal to let the teacher know they are struggling in class. This can be very discreet. By having a teacher knowing this, a young person can feel as though someone is on their side and often this can be enough to enable the young person to cope within the classroom. By giving the space for a young person to do this, may mean they are supported before their anxiety or worries get out of hand. The teacher will be aware they need some time alone or some time to reset.



Some ideas for a signal are:

- Showing a card
- British sign language or a hand signal
- A simple tap of the desk

In order for this signal to work properly two things are needed:

Work with the young person – help them to recognise the signs for being overwhelmed or when they are on their way to feeling like that.

Agreed response – what happens when the young person does this signal? What is the response? What can the young person expect from the adults around them?

Build resilience

It is important that resilience in school is promoted. Ways to increase resilience are:

- Developing life skills
- Promoting positive relationships between staff and young people
- Giving young people a chance to use qualities such as empathy and forgiveness.
- Encouraging lots of self-care.



Producing an action plan

Staff will need to become involved as soon as possible to try to understand what is causing the attendance difficulties. Try to explore by talking with the young person and their family which or how many of Kearney's 'functions' that the school avoidance is supporting¹. Gather this information in a non-judgemental and non-threatening way without imposing any pressure or expectations on the young person. Try to identify the key parts of the day that are difficult and if possible try to order these in terms of difficulty for the child, this will make it easier when planning how to reintroduce the young person to school. Try to identify any sources of strength and resilience in the young person and resources in the wider situation that can be utilised in the plan. Generally, the plan should have the following features:

- Co-produced with the parents.
- Individual and different to those used for other children: it should be based on the information gained
- Identify small steps which are understood and agreed by the young person and their family, which are realistic and achievable (don't try to go too fast for them, ambitious plans are more likely to fail).
- For some the plan will require a much reduced timetable.
- The steps in the plan should be structured and supported in a way that allows a measure of practice and success for the young person every day. Areas of particular difficulty e.g. after illness or holidays need to be anticipated and planned for.
- The start of the plan will be the most difficult, with more distress for the young person. Working together, school and parents need to agree a consistent, united and firm approach.
- Try to identify the areas that aren't as difficult, and the sources of support and strength in the situation, and incorporate these into the plan (e.g. favourite activities, people, or places in the school).
- Outline where individual support is going to be essential to make the plan work. In cases of separation anxiety this will almost always involve the availability of a trusted member of staff and an agreed routine for entering the school site.
- Outline who, how and when school staff and family members can contact each other to solve small organisational issues that might arise. Make sure the plan is discussed and adjusted if necessary at the end of the week.
- Don't deviate from the plan even if things are going well, as going faster than agreed can increase anxiety and reduce trust. **See Appendix 2 for an example of a support plan and the key features required.**

¹ Kearney's 4 functions of EBSA:

1. To avoid negative feelings/situations
2. To escape an aversive social situation
3. Because of separation anxiety/ need for parent/carer contact
4. Rewarding experiences at home

Useful Resources

Edukit - A free online survey to assess mental well-being of pupils

<https://www.edukit.org.uk/home-schooling-resources>

Kooth - Free counselling services

<https://www.kooth.com>

Recovery curriculum – Ideas about what a recovery curriculum looks like

<https://www.evidenceforlearning.net/recoverycurriculum/>

Starving the Anxiety Gremlin: A Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Workbook on Anxiety Management for Young People By Kate Collins-Donnelly

Think Ninja – An app to help young people with the fear and worries surround COVID-19

<https://www.healios.org.uk/services/thinkninja1>

Westminster and Chelsea Educational Psychology Service – Transition recovery: aftermath of COVID-19 pandemic.

What to Do When You Worry Too Much: A Kid's Guide to Overcoming Anxiety By Dawn Heubner

https://search3.openobjects.com/mediamanager/biborough/directory/files/2020_transition_recovery_and_learning_primary_and_nursery_resource_booklet_for_schools.pdf

https://search3.openobjects.com/mediamanager/biborough/directory/files/2020_transition_recovery_and_learning_secondary_resource_booklet_for_schools.pdf

Star Steam – Visual resources and guidance in relation to COVID-19

<http://www.starsteam.org.uk/coronavirus-resources>

Winston's Wish – Preparing children to return to school

<https://www.winstonswish.org/preparing-children-return-school/>

West Sussex – Emotionally based school avoidance toolkit

[Emotionally Based School Avoidance | West Sussex Services for Schools](#)

Sources of Information

Babcock IDP

<https://www.babcockldp.co.uk/inclusion-and-ehwb/anxiety-based-school-avoidance>

Boing Boing

<https://www.boingboing.org.uk/resilience/resilient-therapy-resilience-framework/>

CAMHS North Derbyshire

<https://www.camhsnorthderbyshire.nhs.uk/school-refusal>

Creative Education – Break the cycle of emotionally based school avoidance – online training

<https://elearning.creativeeducation.co.uk/courses/support-young-people-who-are-anxious-to-attend-school/>

Derbyshire County Council

<https://schoolsnet.derbyshire.gov.uk/site-elements/documents/keeping-children-safe-in-education/emerging-school-safeguarding-themes/emotionally-based-school-refusal-guide.pdf>

The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/10/fifth-of-primary-children-afraid-to-leave-house-because-of-covid-19-survey-finds>

Kearney, C. & Silverman, W. (1993). Measuring the Function of School Refusal Behaviour: The School Refusal Assessment Scale' *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology*, 22:1, 85-96.

Maynard, B. R., Brendel, K. E., Bulanda, J. J., Heyne, D., Thomspson, A. & Pigott, T. D. (2015) Psychosocial interventions for school refusal with primary and secondary students: A systematic review. *Campbell Systematic Reviews* 2015:12. DOI: 10.4073/csr.2015.12

The National Autistic Society

<https://www.autism.org.uk/about/in-education/exclusion/school-refusal-strategies.aspx>

Thambirajah, M. S., Grandison K. J., & De-Hayes, L. (2008). *Understanding School Refusal: a handbook for professionals in education, Health and Social Care*. Jessica Kingsley, London: UK.

Wakefield Educational Psychology Service

<http://wakefield.mylocaloffer.org/educational-psychology-service>

West Sussex County Council

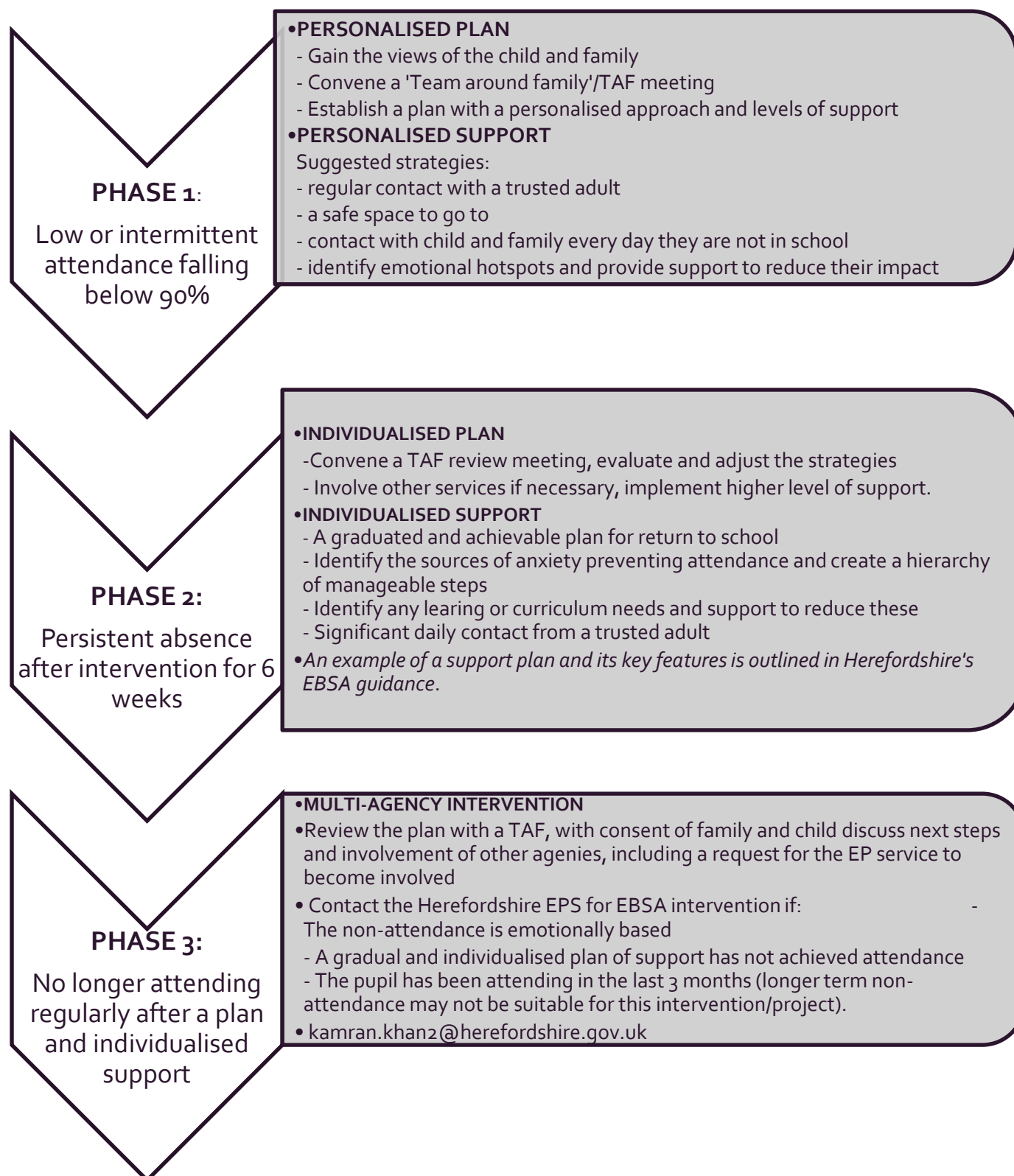
<http://schools.westsussex.gov.uk/Page/10483>

Young Minds

<https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/parents-guide-to-support-a-z/parents-guide-to-support-school-refusal/>

Appendix 1:

Returning to school: a pathway for EBSA



Appendix 2

Key Elements of any Action Plan and an example from West Sussex [Emotionally Based School Avoidance](#)

[West Sussex Services for Schools](#)

Direct telephone contact between parent/carers and key workers in school. Agree expectations regarding frequency of contact and set realistic response times.

A return to school at the earliest opportunity.

Early home visits if appropriate to discuss the young person's reluctance to attend school.

All parties to agree to actions and keep to them until the next review period.

A personalised programme for each young person. (e.g. flexible timetable, arrangements for transport, buddying, and provision of a safe haven).

Ensuring the young person has access to an identified member of staff who can be approached if anxiety becomes temporarily overwhelming in school (i.e. a key worker).

Ensuring all staff (including supply staff) are informed about the young person's difficulties, particularly during changes of classes/key stages.

Identifying a safe place or base in school that the young person can go to if needed

Identifying a member of staff for the young person to 'check in' with throughout the day

Considering whether or not a family assessment such as an Early Help Plan would be helpful to identify whole family support

Example of a support plan template

Support Plan

Name

Date

At school these things can make me feel upset

My school support person/(s) is/are:

Details of checking in with my school support person (When, where)

Until _____ my return to school plan includes the following changes to my attendance

(Identify any changes to days or time they come in)

Changes to my timetable include

(Identify any changes needed and what should happen/ where they should go instead)

Any other changes include:

(Identify any other changes to routines (break, lunch times, changes between lessons etc) to classroom expectations (not expected to read aloud, work in pairs etc) homework

When I start to get upset, I notice these things about myself

When I start to get upset, others notice these things about me

Things I can do to make myself feel better when I'm at school

Things that other people (staff and friends) can do to help me feel better when I'm at school

Things that my family can do to support me to attend school

Places in the school where I can go to where I feel safe and supported

This plan will be reviewed regularly so that it remains helpful.

Review date:

My signature

School support persons'
signature

Parent signature

Other people who have access to the plan are?

Graded Exposure Plans for Children experiencing emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA)

Some children, because of their long-standing or severe EBSA require a personalised plan to help them improve their attendance due to anxiety, which includes an element of very graded exposure. This plan should be consistent with the guidance set out by the Government/DfE in the document 'Working together to improve school attendance' (September, 2022)².

This may:

- Require a reduced time-table and only a gradual increase in attendance.
- The particular duration of this type of plan is based on the needs of the child and their response to it. But the research in this area indicates any plan to return to school which is too quick, or too stressful, can be counter-productive and accentuate anxiety and increase school avoidance.
- This type of plan is recommended for those pupils demonstrating high levels of school based anxiety and should be implemented under the guidance of a professional who is working with the pupil and school³.
- The plan should be time-limited and phased, with arrangements in place for reviewing the plan with staff, parents and the pupil⁴.
- During this time a pupil's absence from school is authorised by school and marked on the attendance registers with an 'I' (signifying absence due to illness).
- The timetable is part of a wider plan arrived at through problem solving with staff, parents and the child. The plan will outline the additional support the child will require at school and home to reduce levels of anxiety and increase their attendance. It will also include strategies and reasonable adjustments to home and school arrangements involving the child e.g. identifying a safe space/safe adult at school.
- The timetable and wider plan is produced with the child and reflects what they feel they are able to cope with and achieve.
- The Local Authority educational psychology team (EPS), and their direct managers support this approach to encouraging pupils back into a positive pattern of school attendance, and any specific queries can be addressed directly to the Principal Educational Psychologist (PEP).

² [*Working together to improve school attendance \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#). See in particular Paragraph 40 and 43, pages 17-18.

³ This may be either a Local Authority Educational Psychologist, CAMHS Practitioner or WEST Practitioner.

⁴ Where these difficulties become long-term and entrenched, the pupil may need additional support to continue their education, such as alternative provision provided by the local authority.