

## What is EBSNA?

Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA) refers to a pattern of children or young people struggling to attend school due to emotional distress, anxiety, or mental health challenges. It's not the same as truancy. EBSNA is often driven by fear or anxiety, not defiance or misbehaviour.

## Warning signs:

There are a number of signs to look out for when it comes to identifying a possible issue that could lead to school avoidance. This signs include;

- Frequent physical complaints before school (for example, headaches, stomach aches, etc...)
- Anxiety, panic attacks, or tearfulness in the morning
- Avoidance behaviours (such as being slow to get ready, missing the bus...)
- Difficulty sleeping or nightmares
- Drop in academic performance
- Social withdrawal or isolation
- Reluctance to talk about school
- Frequent requests to visit the school nurse or go home early
- Increased clinginess or separation anxiety, especially on school mornings

## Sources of support:

### Within school

If you would like further support within school, we may be able to offer the following will be available to you;

- Pastoral support staff
- Safe spaces in school
- In some cases, short-term flexible timetables or reduced hours
- Mental health and wellbeing interventions
- SENDCO discussions if needed

### External support

If school refusal continues despite early strategies, or if your young person's mental health is deteriorating, you could try speaking to;

- GP
- Educational Psychologist
- CAMHS/Mindworks

The following websites may also be useful;

- YoungMinds
- Mindworks Surrey
- NSPCC

YouTube also features some useful videos. We recommend the following titles in particular;

- "Emotionally-Based School Avoidance: A Parent's Experience"
- "School Phobia or EBSA – Tips for Parents and Carers"



# Mental Health Support

## Leaflet 3



Information to support students at risk of emotionally based school non-attendance

## Key information:

EBSNA is more common than you might think. Research suggests that between 1% and 5% of the school population are experiencing it at any given time, while a larger proportion (between 5% and 28%), may experience it at some point during their school years. The earlier it's supported, the better the outcome. Key characteristics of EBSNA include:

- High levels of distress about school
- Difficulty attending despite wanting to do well
- Anxiety-based reasons for absence
- Parents are usually aware and trying to help
- Absence patterns often start gradually and escalate over time (what begins as occasional lateness or reluctance can develop into full non-attendance)
- Children feeling guilty or shame about not going to school (many genuinely want to attend but feel emotionally overwhelmed)

If you have concerns about your young person, it may be useful to keep a simple diary of behaviours, triggers, and what helps - this can support conversations with the school or GP. Sharing as much information as you can is always helpful.

## What you can do:

There are a number of things that you can do at home to support your young person if they are struggling;

### Stay Calm and Supportive

- Reassure them that you're there to help, not to judge.
- Use phrases like: 'It's okay to feel this way', or 'Let's figure this out together'.

### Keep Daily Routines

- Stick to wake-up, meal, and bedtime routines even on non-school days.
- Encourage getting dressed and leaving the house, even for short walks.

### Praise Small Wins

- Recognise steps like putting on uniform, attending part of the day, or walking near school.

### Don't Let Avoidance Become the Norm

- While it's tempting to let them stay home, try to avoid long-term avoidance as it can increase anxiety.

### Communicate Regularly with School

- You're not alone. Let the school know what's going on so they can support from their side.
- Working in partnership with the school is key. An open dialogue can lead to more interventions being implemented quickly.

## The 'why' question:

Understanding the 'why' can help guide the right support. It's not about blame - these are barriers, not excuses. Some possible factors are:

- Friendship issues or social anxiety
- Bullying or fear of peers
- Academic pressures/fear of failure
- Special educational needs (SEND) or undiagnosed learning difficulties
- Transitions like changing schools, homes, or family structure
- Autism/ADHD: Often EBSNA is linked to neurodiversity
- Previous trauma or bereavement
- Challenges at home: Children may absorb stress at home, which can heighten their emotional distress around attending school.
- Negative school experiences or lack of belonging such as feeling misunderstood, unsupported by staff, or excluded from school culture can lead to withdrawal.
- Sensory overwhelm in school environments such as loud, crowded, or chaotic settings can be distressing - especially for children with sensory sensitivities.
- School avoidance reinforcement at home: If staying home leads to comfort, attention, or reduced anxiety, the behaviour may become reinforced unintentionally.