

Advice and guidance for schools

Emotionally Based School Avoidance

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What is Emotionally Based School Avoidance?

Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) refers to a situation in which a child or young person has a severe difficulty in attending school often resulting in prolonged absence. It is accompanied by significant emotional upset which can include internalised difficulties such as feeling ill without organic cause when faced with going to school e.g., stomach ache; feeling miserable; being excessively fearful and externalised difficulties, such as visible displays of anger and overwhelming distress. Children and young people with emotionally based school avoidance are at home with parental knowledge during school hours. Some researchers make a distinction between emotionally based school avoidance and those who are absent from school due to truanting (Thambirajah et al, 2008), others believe emotional reasons are behind all school non-attendance.

There have been several other phrases used to describe this situation over the years, including school phobia, school refusal and anxiety based school avoidance / anxiety based school refusal. The term emotionally based school avoidance is most commonly used currently, as it allows for a wider understanding of the situation and associated factors, rather than locating the difficulty purely within the child themselves.

Studies have found that around 1-5% of the school population may experience emotionally based school avoidance, although rates vary according to the exact definition and criterion used. There is a slightly higher prevalence amongst high school students and an increase in occurrence around key transitions. It is reported to be equally common in males and females. Some researchers suggest it is equally spread across socioeconomic status (King & Bernstein, 2001), but it appears government figures indicate that children from poorer/ more deprived households are at greater risk (DfE, *Pupil Absence*, 2020). Although in many cases the onset of emotionally based school avoidance is quite gradual, it can sometimes occur suddenly after time away from school for a holiday, illness or difficult life event, such as a bereavement.

Research is ongoing about the impact of the covid-19 pandemic on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing, and their engagement with schooling over this time. Anecdotally within schools in Kirklees, some children have welcomed the opportunity to learn at home, where it might be quieter or removed from aspects of school they find difficult. However, a higher level of anxiety in society generally, including around the health effects of the virus and the impact on employment and people's livelihoods is likely to have an effect on children. In addition, whilst many children will cope well with the challenges that the pandemic has brought, frequent changes accompanied by a sense of uncertainty or lack of control can lead to increased levels of anxiety for some people. A number of children have found it hard to return to school following additional unexpected breaks for lockdown, bubble closures or self-isolation.

This document aims to provide educational settings with guidance that highlights good practice, recommendations and resources and enables them to work collaboratively with parents/carers to support children and young people with needs relating to anxiety and emotionally based school avoidance. A key objective of the guidance is to facilitate educational settings in their planning, assessment and intervention, at a school level. It is felt that guidance on this issue is timely due to any increases in need that might have been precipitated by the pandemic, but this advice is applicable to all young people and the

guidance extends beyond the current circumstances and is good practice for all young people experiencing emotions that present a barrier to them thriving in school.

It is acknowledged that emotionally based school avoidance is a complex area of need and involvement from other services/professionals can be advantageous, appropriate and, at times, necessary. However, the aims and scope of the current guidance is to support early and effective intervention, which could prevent the level of need escalating further and promote positive outcomes for the child or young person.

Anxiety and Emotionally Based School Avoidance

Anxiety has been identified as a key feature of Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA), though it is not always evident. A certain level of anxiety is considered a normal and natural part of growing up; however, some young people may experience heightened levels of anxiety which impact on their functioning and school experiences.

When the anxiety is linked to school avoidance, the young person may experience anxious and fearful thoughts around attending school and their ability to cope with school. These feelings may also be accompanied by physiological symptoms of anxiety such as nausea, vomiting, shaking, sweating etc, and may start the night before, or even a few days before school.

To avoid these overwhelming emotions and the fear associated with school attendance the young person may withdraw from the situation, refusing to get ready for school or to leave the house or enter the school. The young person may also turn to hostile behaviours to avoid what they perceive as a threatening situation and to try and control what feels like a very 'out-of-control' situation (Thambirajah et al., 2008).

These behaviours, and the avoidance of school, may then contribute to the maintenance of emotionally based school avoidance over time. Heyne and Rollings (2002) suggest that it is crucial to consider the child's perceptions of their ability to cope, including perceived social and academic competence, as negative thoughts about one's ability to cope can lead to further feelings of worry and if left unaddressed, may undermine attempts to improve attendance.

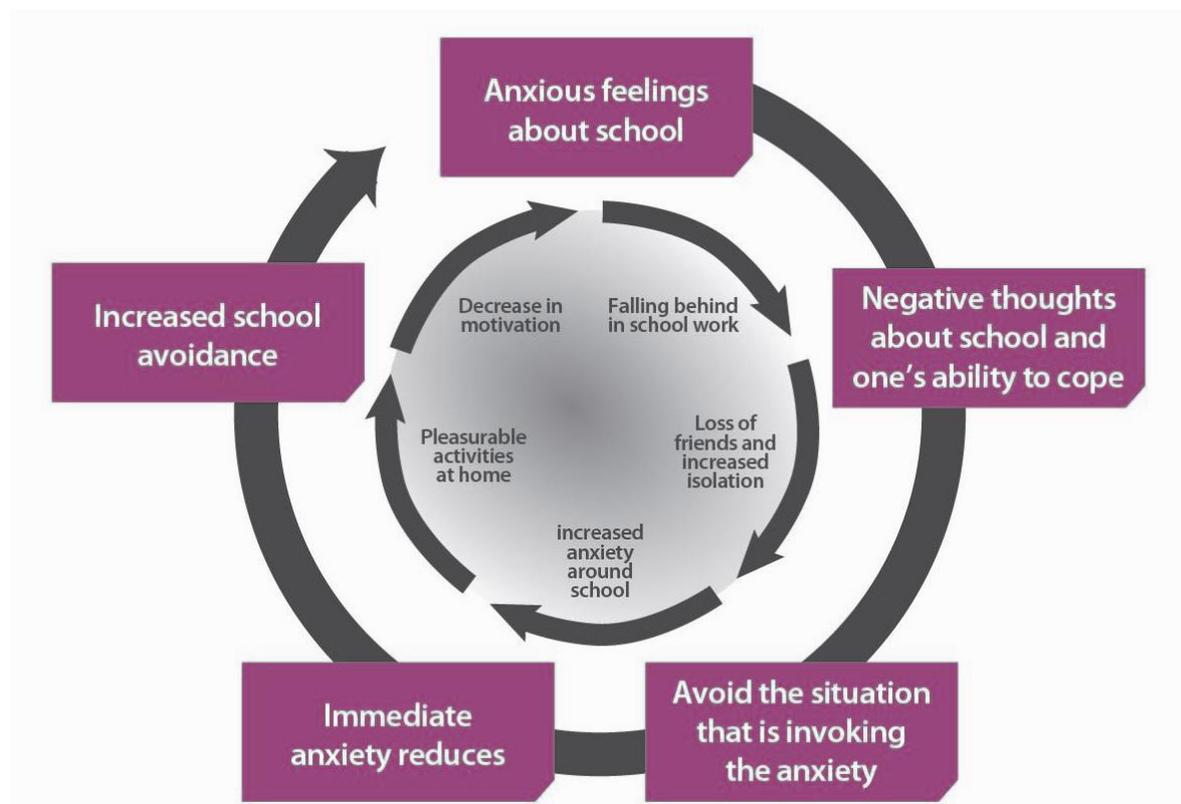


Figure 1: Diagram showing the initial anxiety causing the non-attendance and the secondary maintenance factors.

When supporting young people with anxiety it can help to understand the nature of anxiety in some detail and how it might express itself at home and at school.

Key facts about anxiety in children and young people:

- Although anxiety can feel unpleasant and can make people feel very unwell, it is not dangerous. It is ok to feel some anxiety some of the time and experiencing and tolerating small (but not overwhelming) amounts of anxiety is key to making changes when a young person is experiencing emotionally based school avoidance.
- One way to address feelings of anxiety can be to avoid the situation which is making us anxious, leading to a quick relief. Unfortunately, what tends to happen is that this avoidance does not help the fear in the long term. In fact, it can make us even more frightened. It can also lead to us avoiding more and more places and situations. In the end, if we permit avoidance, anxiety can lead to us avoiding many activities that we once enjoyed and benefited from, leading to a restricted and less fulfilled life.
- Although emotionally based school avoidance is linked with anxiety this may not always be evident or obvious during the school day. For example a child may be anxious about walking into school and leaving their parent, but once they are settled in school, this anxiety then decreases somewhat. This is because, when our feared situation disappears, anxiety can quickly subside.
- Other children may 'mask' anxiety within school so that it is not evident. They may experience high levels of feelings internally, but external behaviours linked to the anxiety are not evident until they feel safer again, which can typically be when they are back at home, or in a place they experience as safe.
- Young people with anxiety in school often feel overwhelmed and out of control. They may seek to gain control where they can, for example, by refusing to follow instructions or directions or engage with adult led activities.
- Sometimes in children and young people, anxiety can look like anger. This is because, when we are very anxious, we can go into a fight / flight / freeze state in which we react as if our life is in danger. This can lead to quite extreme behaviours in which young people behave as if there is a very significant threat (for example, the perceived threat of being in school).

What causes Emotionally Based School Avoidance?

There is no one cause for emotionally based school avoidance and each case is likely to be underpinned by complex and interlinked factors including the young person, the family and the school environment (Thambirajah et. al, 2008).

Factors influencing emotionally based school avoidance, according to the research, include:

1. Four functions of school non-attendance (Kearney, 2008)
2. Risk and resilience factors
3. 'Push' factors and 'pull factors' (Thambirajah et al, 2008)

1. Functions of school non-attendance

Kearney and Silverman's (1990) review of the literature indicates that there tends to be four main reasons for school avoidance:

1. To avoid uncomfortable feelings brought on by attending school, such as feelings of anxiety or low mood.	2. To avoid situations that might be stressful, such as academic demands, social pressures and/or aspects of the school environment.
3. To reduce separation anxiety or to gain attention and connection from significant others, such as parents or other family members.	4. To engage in rewarding experiences outside of school, such as going shopping or playing computer games during school time.

According to this model, the avoidance of uncomfortable feelings or situations described in points 1 and 2 above, could be viewed as *negatively reinforcing* the emotionally based school avoidance, whereas in points 3 and 4, the emotionally based school avoidance could be seen as being *positively reinforced* by factors outside of school (Kearney & Spear, 2012).

Key to resolving situations with emotionally based school avoidance successfully is an individual assessment process which considers relevant factors in detail.

2. Risk and Resilience Factors for Emotionally Based School Avoidance

Risk:

Research has highlighted factors that place children at greater risk of emotionally based school avoidance. It is usually a combination of predisposing factors interacting with a change in circumstances which leads to the pattern of behaviour described as emotionally based school avoidance.

The table shows risk factors that are associated with emotionally based school avoidance that can be related to the school, family and child.

Table to show risk factors associated with Emotionally Based School Avoidance

School Factors	Family Factors	Child Factors
Bullying (most common school factor)	Separation or divorce	Temperamental style
Academic difficulties	Bereavement and loss	Fear of failure/poor self confidence
Academic pressure	Parental health issues	Trauma
Transitions	Conflict within the home	Physical illness
Exams	Being the youngest child	Age (5-6, 11-12 & 13-14 years)
Peer or staff relationships	High levels of stress within the home	Learning difficulties
Transport or journey to school	Young carer	Separation anxiety

The Well-Being Toolkit for Mental Health Leads, by Dr Tina Rae, Dr Jo Wood and Dr Amy Such

For every young person there can be factors about themselves and their situation which could put them at risk of developing emotionally based school avoidance and it being maintained. There will also be protective or resilience factors which can help the situation.

Resilience:

As well as considering risk factors it is important to both identify and build areas of strength or resilience of the child, family and school which may help to ‘protect’ the child and promote school attendance.

This may include:

- Developing ambition, aspiration and motivation
- Increasing confidence, self-esteem, self-efficacy, value in themselves
- Developing feelings of safety, security and a sense of belonging
- Having positive experiences where they can succeed
- Holding positive relationships with peers or staff
- Feeling listened to and understood
- Understanding the relationship between thoughts, feelings and behaviour
- Willingness to work in partnership between school, family and external professionals
- Developing parenting skills and understanding
- Flexibility of approaches within school, person-centred listening to the voice of the child

Identifying and (where possible) addressing risk factors and building on resilience factors is a clear way to making changes which supports the young person’s return to school.

3. Push and Pull Factors

Risk and resilience factors can sometimes be conceptualised as push or pull factors:

- 'Push' factors (i.e., those that push the child towards attending school)
- 'Pull' factors (i.e., those pull the child away from attending school)



SCHOOL	HOME
<p>Push towards attending school</p> <p><i>For example</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Academically bright</i> - <i>Has a close friend in school</i> 	<p>Pull away from school (home factors)</p> <p><i>For example</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Separation anxiety from parent</i> - <i>Member of family ill</i>
<p>Pull away from school</p> <p><i>For example</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Prolonged period of absence from school</i> - <i>Behind in lessons</i> - <i>Challenging transition to school</i> 	<p>Push towards staying at home</p> <p><i>For example</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Reduces anxiety about separating from parent</i> - <i>Reduces anxiety about attending school</i>

Research indicates that emotionally based school avoidance is most likely to occur when the risks are greater than resilience, when stress and anxiety exceeds support, and when the 'pull' factors that promote school avoidance overwhelm the 'push' factors that encourage school attendance.

What to do when a child is showing signs of Emotionally Based School Avoidance





Identification

School plays a vital role in the identification of children and young people who are currently experiencing, or at risk of emotionally based school avoidance. It is important for schools to develop effective whole school systems to support young people, be vigilant to early indicators and employ a thorough assess, plan, do and review cycle placing the young person at the heart of the interventions.

Potential indicators

It is very important to be proactive with emotionally based school avoidance. The longer the issues remain unaddressed the poorer the outcome, as the difficulties and behaviours become entrenched. Schools need to be vigilant in monitoring attendance of young people, noticing any patterns in non-attendance or changes to behaviours.

Potential Indicators
Difficulty attending school with periods of prolonged absence
Child reluctant to leave home and stays away from school with the knowledge of the parent/carer
For younger children reluctance to leave parents or get out of the car
Regular absence without indication of anti-social behaviours
Frequent absences for minor illnesses
Patterns in absences, for example, particular days and/or subjects, after weekends and holidays
Reluctance to attend school trips
The young person expresses a desire to attend classes but is unable to do so
Anxiety on separation and inappropriate dependence on family members e.g., worry expressed about the safety of those at home
Evidence of under-achievement of learning potential
Social isolation and avoidance of classmates or peer group
Challenging behaviours, particularly in relation to specific situations at school
Severe emotional upset with excessive fearfulness, outbursts of temper and complaints of feeling ill on school days
Depression and sense of isolation resulting in, low self-esteem and lack of confidence

Confusion or extreme absent mindedness shown in school due to lack of concentration resulting in, lower attainments

Physical changes i.e., sweating, sickness, aching limbs, headaches, panic attacks, abdominal pain, rapid weight loss or gain

Where significant risks of emotionally based school avoidance are identified, it's important to gather further information from the young person, parent and school staff involved with the young person and put into place strategies to support the young person as soon as possible. Swift action can prevent emotionally based school avoidance from becoming entrenched and result in much better outcomes. School should follow a thorough assess, plan, do and review cycle placing the young person at the heart of the planning and interventions.



Assessment

Once a difficulty has been identified there should be a prompt investigation into the reasons for the difficulties. For any intervention or support plan to be successful it is essential to gain an understanding of the various aspects causing and maintaining the emotionally based school avoidance behaviours. Therefore, information needs to be gathered which:

- Considers risk and protective factors
- Explores the function of the emotionally based school avoidance, considering the four functions of school non-attendance (Kearney, 2008)
- Identifies 'push' factors and 'pull factors'

Due to the complex nature of emotionally based school avoidance no fixed 'assessment process' can be followed. However, in all cases it is essential that the views of the young person, the family and key school staff are gathered and listened to.

Complicating factors: It is crucial to acknowledge that each person involved will bring their own perspective, views and interpretations to a problem situation.

Simple causation is not possible as emotionally based school avoidance occurs because of a complex interaction of factors. Furthermore, attempts to define cause can encourage blaming and individuals can then become anxious and defensive. For example, parents may feel blamed for the absences, feel that their parenting skills are being criticised and they may be fearful that they will get into trouble or even prosecuted for nonattendance. Children may feel guilty or scared that they will be forced to attend school. To support effectively we need to acknowledge complexity and interact without judgement of others.

Gathering and Interpreting Information:

- **Child's views**

Any child currently avoiding school will become anxious when asked to discuss returning. They currently manage feelings of anxiety by employing the avoidant behaviour of not going to school, so any talk about going back to school is going to raise their anxiety as you are proposing to take away their way of coping with their fears. A good place to start any assessment with a young person is to acknowledge it may be difficult, but you would like to know what they think and feel. It is important that the adult does not dismiss anxieties or worries the child has, empathise with the young person but do not collude or promote the emotionally based school avoidance. The approaches taken will depend on the child's age, level of understanding and language. Even if they are able, often children find it difficult to verbalise what they are thinking and feeling, and they may prefer to draw what they are feeling or have visual prompts.

The following are some approaches that can prove useful:

School Wellbeing Cards:

Created by Educational Psychologist Dr Jerricah Holder; these cards are grounded in resilience research & reflect key risk factors associated with school avoidance or unhappiness at school as well as strength and protective factors that promote school attendance and wellbeing. The cards can be used as a card sorting activity with the child so that they can share their experience of school and what would help them.



(www.schoolwellbeingcards.co.uk)

Feelings Map:

Draw a map of the school with the student. Remember to include all places that the student spends time in school (e.g., toilets, corridors, cloak rooms and staff rooms can be important). You can even include the student's journey to and from school. Rate each item drawn on the map according to a feelings scale which is developmentally appropriate (e.g., Five Point Scale, happy/sad/calm smiley faces or a personalised one which the student has constructed themselves). To identify priority issues, you could discuss with the students three areas on the map which give rise to uncomfortable feelings that they would like to change to help them feel better about school. This information can be used to inform the intervention/support plan.



Feelings Map for a High School Student

Ideal Classroom / School:

Ask the student to draw an 'ideal' school whilst providing prompting questions (e.g., arriving at school, in the classroom, what would the playground be like? what about other children? the teachers and helpers etc). Ask the student to draw their 'real' school using the same questions as prompts. When the drawing is complete, ask the student to rate how comfortable they currently feel at their real school (e.g., out of 10). Discuss with the student three ways that would make their 'real' school feel more like their 'ideal' school drawing. Ask the student to rate how they would feel about school if those changes were made. This information can be used to inform the intervention/support plan.



Scaling:

Scaling can be used to help young people rate subjects or aspects of the day from most to least preferred. This can support a conversation about ways that school can support them in least preferred subjects and how they can develop their curriculum strengths.



A quick and simple example of scaling using the 5-point scale. The student used post-it notes to rate subjects from most to least preferred.

The following website has a wide range of additional ideas and resources for gathering young people's views:

<http://www.sheffkids.co.uk/adultsite/pages/communicateworksheets.html>

- **Parent views**

A home visit / meeting with parents can be a helpful way to gather parental views. It is important that this meeting is handled sensitively and recognises that a child's anxiety and nonattendance can be a very stressful experience for the whole family. Page 25 explores working collaboratively with parents and gives suggestions on how to develop effective interaction with caregivers. Appendix 3 provides prompts for questions which can help to structure the conversation.

- **School staff**

Information/views should be sought from the staff that work most closely with the young person. We all respond differently according to the environment, situations or task and with different people. Each member of staff may have valuable information to help identify triggers for anxiety and strategies the young person responds positively to. It is important to seek out the views of any members of staff the young person speaks positively about and any member of staff where relationships may be more difficult.

Key information to gather includes:

- The young person's strengths and interests
- What is going well
- Any aspirations the young person has expressed for the future
- Any difficulties they have noticed
- Times when difficulties seem less apparent

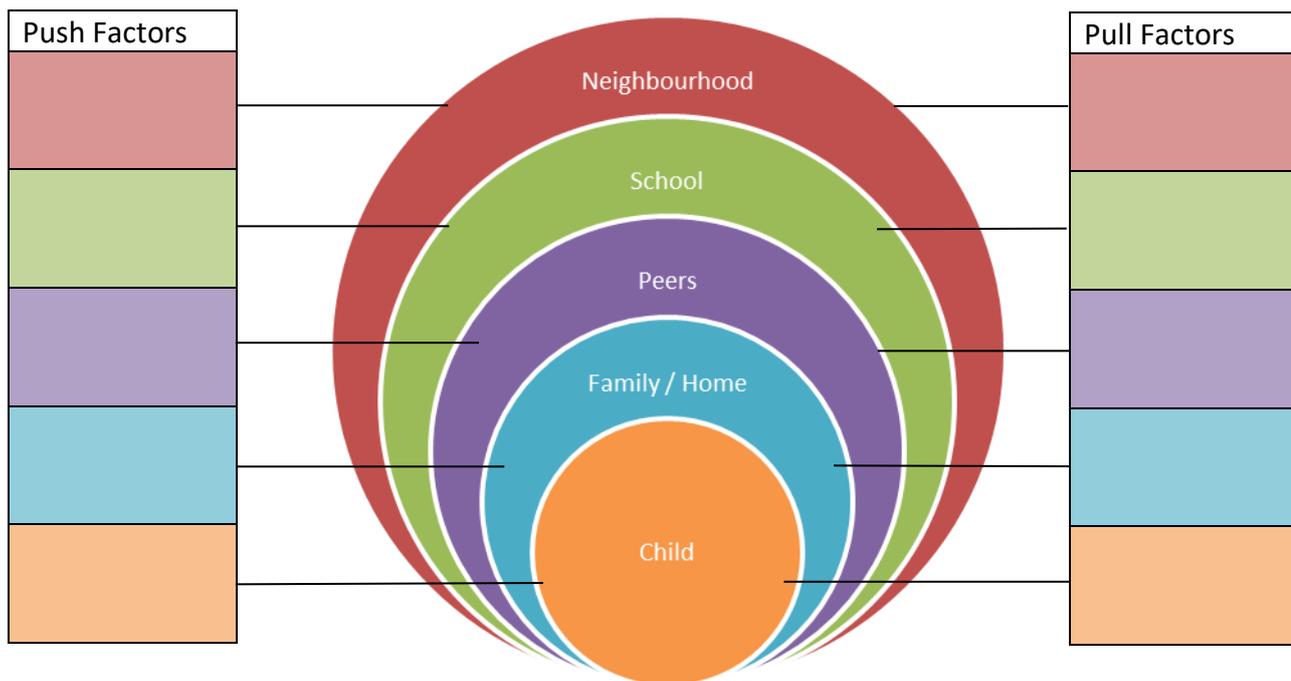
- Peer relationships
- Relationships with adults
- Response to academic tasks
- What support or differentiation is put in place and how the young person responds to this
- Any ideas for further support

Formulation

Once information has been gathered it is important that this is collated to create an overview and make ‘sense’ of the whole situation. This overview should enable you to identify the various factors that are at play and allow hypotheses to be formed.

It is important to acknowledge that behaviour does not emerge within a social vacuum; therefore, it is vital to consider how systemic factors may be influencing the young person. A range of underlying, intertwined factors may be promoting and/or maintaining emotionally based school avoidance behaviour across the young person’s systems (e.g., family/home, peers, school, and neighbourhood). This figure below depicts how a young person can be conceptualised as sitting within a wider range of systems; influencing factors within these systems can affect one another and also the young person.

The diverse range of influencers are also conceptualised as the push and pull factors which were outlined earlier in this document on page 8. Push and pull factors are likely to be present across systems. The balance between these factors is likely to fluctuate. The diagram below can help you to formulate the push and pull factors present for individual children. A full-page version of this is also available in Appendix 2.



Schools should take an individual and flexible approach to the young person's needs. All school staff that will encounter the young person should be aware of the return to school plan and any adaptations to normal routines or expectations that are in place to support the child. Once actions on a support plan are agreed with a young person, e.g., returning to school in very finely graded steps, stick to what has been agreed for that week, even if things seem to be going well, as pushing things further than agreed can heighten anxiety, reduce trust and backfire overall. The format of the support plan should be flexible. If appropriate a young person's version should be created.

An example support plan can be found in Appendix 5.



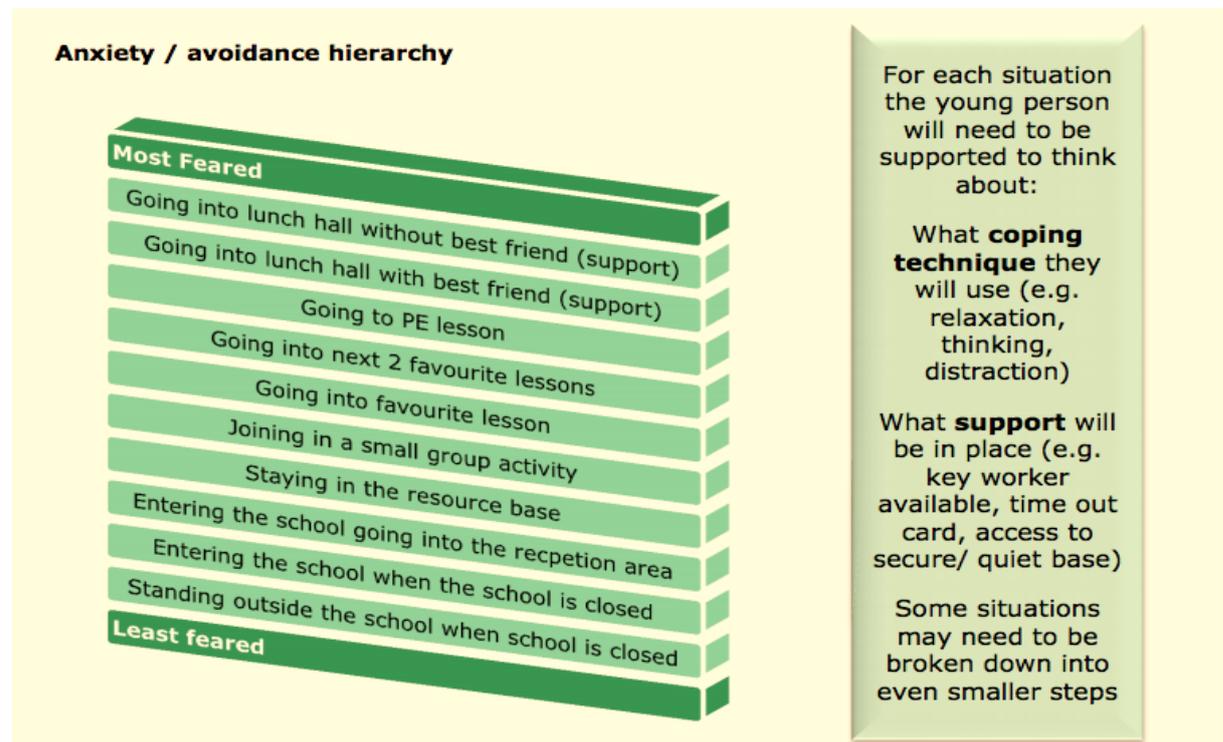
Interventions/Strategies

Kearney and Silverman (1990) suggest that choice of interventions should be governed by a careful functional analysis of school avoidance behaviour. They describe four types of variables which can maintain school avoidance behaviour, however several of these may be involved and their effects will be interactive. Interventions should be bespoke to the individual and based upon the information which was gathered in the assessment and integration stage.

- 1. To avoid something or situations that elicit negative feelings or high levels of stress** (e.g., fear of the toilets; the noise in the playground; lots of people moving all together in the corridors between classes, tests/ exams) interventions should include:
 - Psychoeducation - learning about anxiety and worrying, how it affects our thinking, feeling and behaviour and how avoidance of the feared situation makes things worse. [Links to resources to support schools in this can be found in the Resource Section, for example *Starving the Anxiety Gremlin*, by Kate Collins-Donnelly.](#)
 - Teaching the child anxiety management techniques such as relaxation training and deep breathing.
 - There should be a gradual re-exposure to the school setting using an **anxiety / avoidance hierarchy** created with the young person from least feared school situations to most feared (Anxiety / avoidance hierarchy, see below).
 - School should consider the provision of safe spaces that pupils can go to, such as a pastoral zone, and library, these may be less stigmatising for some pupils than the learning support area for example.

Anxiety / avoidance hierarchy

To create an anxiety/avoidance hierarchy, the young person can be asked to name situations (or shown cards representing possible fears) and asked to rank them in terms of how they feel about that situation or object from least worried about to most worried about. When thinking about next steps it is important to start with the item that causes the least amount of anxiety, helping them think about how they will cope with this situation and what support they will need. When they have overcome this fear and consolidated this several times then they can begin to work their way up the hierarchy.



- 2. To escape difficult social situations** (e.g., feeling left out at playtime; reading out loud in class or other public speaking/group task; working as part of a group) as with the first function intervention should include:
 - Psychoeducation - learning about anxiety and worrying, how it affects our thinking, feeling and behaviour. How avoidance of the feared situation makes things worse.
 - Teaching the child anxiety management techniques such as relaxation training and deep breathing.
 - Teaching the child social skills and giving opportunities to practice coping skills in real-life social and evaluative situations, starting small and building up to most challenging.
 - Pre-teaching of key work missed, buddying, peer mentoring and role playing what they are going to say when peers ask about their absence from school.
- 3. To get attention from or spend more time with significant others** (e.g., change in family dynamic, concerned about the well-being of parent). Intervention would usually include work with caregivers supporting them to develop skills and techniques to:
 - Establish positive and individual time to spend with the child outside school hours

- Manage the school avoidance behaviours such as tantrums or physical/ somatic complaints
- Establish morning and evening routines
- Sunday evening and Monday morning plans can be useful
- Use problem solving techniques
- Focus on positive behaviours
- Limit the attention the child receives when they do not attend school
- Establish rewards for when they attend school

- 4. To spend more time out of school as it is more fun or stimulating** (watch tv, go shopping, play computer games, hang out with friends). Intervention would usually include:
- Increasing “rewards” for attendance and disincentives for nonattendance i.e., laptop time, access to internet, phone credit, time with friends in town, etc.
 - Limit the attention a child receives during non-attendance
 - If possible, take away the more stimulating activity
 - Support their travel to and from school
 - Teach them how to refuse offers from peers
 - Make school as stimulating as possible, find out the child or young person’s interests and if possible, apply this to the work completed in school.

Review

It is essential that any plan is regularly reviewed. There should be set dates for reviewing how any support plan is progressing and key personnel to attend identified. It is essential that the young people and parents are actively involved in the review.

The review should identify and celebrate any progress made and review whether further information has come to light to help inform clear next steps.

These next steps can include:

- consolidating and maintaining the current support plan,
- setting new outcomes and/or actions for the young person, school and parents.
- Identifying that further consultation with other agencies needs to occur which may, if necessary, lead to a referral to other services.

What works for children and young people with Emotionally Based School Avoidance?

Often it can feel hard to make a change to the situation when a young person is experiencing emotionally based school avoidance. The circumstances can make adults (both family members and school staff) feel stuck and powerless, which can be frustrating. Young people themselves can find it hard to imagine a future in which they can confidently attend school again.

Nevertheless, there is good evidence that creating a bespoke intervention for each young person based on the assessment of risk and resilience factors described above can be very effective. We need to consider the factors that are maintaining the emotionally based school avoidance for that young person and address these as far as we can, whilst looking at how we can highlight and engage the strengths and resilience factors within the situation.

Whatever risk and resilience factors are present, there are some important actions that can be beneficial in many cases of emotionally based school avoidance. As with risk and resilience factors, these are related to the young person themselves, but also their family, school and wider environment.

The next section explains ways of working that can make a significant difference to the lives of children and young people with emotionally based school avoidance.

What Works... Supporting the Child / Young Person

- ✓ Treat the child as an individual and develop a personalised programme that takes account of the push-pull factors in their situation and the function of the school avoidance for the child.
- ✓ Many young people require a high degree of nurture to return to school. Ensure a key member of school staff has time to build a relationship with the young person whilst they are at home, and to check in with the young person as they start to return to school.
- ✓ Show empathy for the young person's distress.
- ✓ Develop feelings of safety, security and belonging, both at home and at school.
- ✓ Normalise the situation – reassure the young person that they are not the only one experiencing emotionally based school avoidance and that there is nothing 'wrong' with them, they are having a difficult time and it will pass.
- ✓ Seek the young person's views about aspects of school that are going well and what is more challenging for them.
- ✓ Seek the young person's viewpoint regarding home and family life to identify positive factors and relationships and any areas of concern or worry.
- ✓ Be positive and optimistic - express hope for the situation and confidence in the young person that they will be able to return to, and enjoy, education.
- ✓ Boost the young person's self-esteem by highlighting areas of strength.
- ✓ Support the young person to develop their aspirations towards learning and future achievement by considering their strengths and interests.

- ✓ Use the child's strengths and interests when developing a plan (e.g., develop a programme which starts with accessing music or sport, or spending time with their friends, if these are protective factors).
- ✓ Provide teaching around anxiety at an age-appropriate level. Support the young person to understand how anxiety works, what it feels like and why avoidance can sometimes make things worse.
- ✓ Teach emotional regulation strategies if appropriate (be mindful that these may be difficult to take on board at a stressful time with lots of change).
- ✓ Don't delay! Start helping the young person to take steps towards returning to school to start as soon as possible to prevent the situation becoming too entrenched.
- ✓ Provided a graded exposure to school (see case study: Ben below), with enough time for the young person to feel comfortable at each stage and for fear to subside. Each young person's steps to engagement with school will be different, as it will need to start with areas they enjoy and can engage with easily before moving onto aspects that are more feared. For some young people this may need to involve very small steps.
- ✓ Hold regular review meetings to monitor progress and plan next steps. Involve the family and other agencies and seek the child's viewpoint on the situation before each review.
- ✓ Expect setbacks and don't reprimand the child when they occur. Instead examine what went wrong to try to learn from it and express confidence that progress is still being made overall. Be persistent!



Graded Exposure - Case study: Ben

Ben was a year 7 pupil who had had a successful time at primary school, attaining well, although he had sometimes found it hard to separate from his mother and try new activities such as out of school clubs and events. Ben experienced the bereavement of a family member and his mother had been unwell for a short period just before he started at high school. Initially Ben settled well but after a few weeks he was appearing very anxious on his return home. The situation escalated quickly, and Ben started to become more and more reluctant to attend, initially complaining of stomach aches and then appearing visibly upset when school was discussed. One day, when strongly encouraged to go into school by his family Ben became unusually aggressive at the entrance to school. Following this, Ben refused to attend school at all.

Ben built up a positive relationship with the school's Family Support Worker, who, in conjunction with the SENCo and Educational Psychologist worked to support Ben and his family around the return to school. This took around 4 months overall. Initially Ben's parents were worried about him returning to school as he had been so upset there and they needed to be part of the process to help him return gradually and with plenty of success. A key aspect of this process was a graded exposure approach in which Ben experienced an aspect of the return to school, on several occasions, before he felt comfortable enough to move on to the next step. For Ben, this went something like this:

1. Speaking with the Family Support Worker from school at home and building trust.
2. Driving past school when it was closed with his dad. Talking about school in a low-key no-pressure way.
3. Visiting the school building and grounds after school hours.
4. Entering school and chatting to his keyworker for half an hour at the end of the day in a room close to a way out.
5. Gradually increasing the amount of time spent in school and completing some set work on his own in the room close to a door with his keyworker.
6. Attending one preferred lesson with a clear plan beforehand about seating, what he would say to friends etc.
7. Over a period of around two months from his first lesson back in school, gradually experiencing a wider range of lessons and also less structured times of day (e.g., breaktimes, moving between lessons, assembly) with regular support sessions and check-ins from his keyworker.

Seeking Ben's viewpoint at each stage was crucial to ensuring that this process worked for him. There were hiccups in the process which at times felt very challenging for all concerned, and sometimes Ben had to move back to an earlier stage before continuing again.

Ben's reintegration to school was a significant time commitment for his keyworker in school for some months as she engaged in regular phone calls, organised meetings, liaised with the family and other agencies and communicated Ben's needs to the wider staff. However, by the end of Year 7 he was back in school attending for most of the day, every day and enjoying learning, progressing well.

What Works... Involving the Family

- ✓ School staff to carry out an early home visit (or if unable to do this because of the pandemic, a remote meeting or telephone call). If there are already other agencies involved (e.g., Family Support Worker, Educational Psychologist, CAMHS) consider if a joint home visit between school and this agency can be arranged.
- ✓ Provide the family with the contact details of a key member of staff to liaise with regarding the situation over the next few weeks and perhaps months.
- ✓ Provide psychoeducation around anxiety and avoidance.
- ✓ Check whether the family need any further support. Some families may need support to ensure that a clear daily routine and sleep pattern is in place and to adopt clear boundaries to help a return to school.
- ✓ Build a supportive, trusting relationship with parents and carers and avoid blame and criticism. Instead focus on coming to a joint plan for next steps.

What Works... School Factors

- ✓ Seek information from all staff who work with the young person about their strengths and progress in school, and any concerns (academic or social). Consider how to use this information in future plans for support, remembering risk and resilience factors.
- ✓ Identify a keyworker to support return to school and ensure they have the time available to support the child and family
- ✓ Provide consistent support for the young person across the school day. Ensure all staff who interact with the young person are aware of the situation, understand the nature of anxiety and know how the young person would like any difficulties that arise to be handled to avoid situations escalating.
- ✓ Ensure that flexibility to meet the young people's needs is in place in school, including being able to support their emotional needs at short notice if required.
- ✓ Be flexible in addressing any curriculum issues as the return to school process is underway.
- ✓ Address any difficulties with parts of the school (e.g., toilets, changing rooms, busy corridors) that may be stressful for the young person by making adjustments if needed.
- ✓ As a priority before return address any concerns around bullying or friendships.
- ✓ Consider whether the young person needs a safe place to go within school if they are feeling upset or anxious.
- ✓ When a young person returns to school for break and lunchtimes consider whether additional provision is required at these times, e.g., a quieter lunchtime environment. Some children will require support around friendships and social interaction in school as a priority. If this has been a key factor underlying their school avoidance.
- ✓ Ensure that any learning needs are identified and provided for, and the child knows what support will be in place.

Other Practitioners/Service Representatives

- ✓ Involve any professionals who are already involved with the child in regular review meetings.
- ✓ Mental health and wellbeing support may need to be provided by other agencies. Consider if any additional referrals need to be made.

Working Collaboratively with Parents and Carers

Research around emotionally based school avoidance highlights the importance of intervening early and adopting a supportive, collaborative approach involving the child/young person, parents/caregivers and key members of school staff (together with professionals from other services) in supporting a child or young person to return to school at the earliest opportunity. Facilitating parents and carers to share their views and become actively involved, and working together with professionals, to develop and implement an individualised plan for the child/young person, is essential to achieving the most successful outcomes.

When building a partnership with parents and carers, it is important to recognise that they may find it difficult to talk about the concerns they have and the difficulties that they are having getting their child to school. The family may be experiencing significant stress and asking for help or taking action may feel overwhelming. It is important to recognise and remain sensitive to parents' emotional capacity and listen to them and their experiences.

Parents may be concerned that other people will blame them for their child's absence, that a judgement will be made about their parenting capacity or that they will get into trouble in some way. In some instances, parents may have had similar experiences to their child or experience their own anxiety. It is important for school staff to recognise this, as well as remaining curious about the potential barriers to school attendance.

Open and honest communication between school and parents will be essential in building a trusting and supportive partnership. It will be helpful to identify a key person in school who can communicate regularly with parents, as well as to co-ordinate the return to school plan and the involvement of support services if required.

Identifying and understanding barriers to school attendance can be complex and it is acknowledged that there are occasions where a child or young person's emotionally based school avoidance might have been misidentified and misunderstood. In such cases, the nature and extent of the difficulties experienced by the child or young person, the stress placed upon their parents/caregivers and family and potential contributory factors might not have been fully appreciated nor considered.

In addition to feeling blamed for their child's difficulties attending school, it may also be the case that processes relating to low school attendance have been put in place, which could result in parents or caregivers facing legal implications (including fines or prosecution). The threat of facing such action is highly likely to place additional pressures upon caregivers and the child/young person themselves. If parents or carers feel in a position where they need to force attendance *without a secure understanding of the child's needs/their individual situation being established, nor appropriate support put in place*, this is likely to have a negative impact upon the child or young person's wellbeing and lead to increased tension in relationships (including the child-caregiver relationship and relationships between the child, family and school). Therefore, this approach has not been found to be an effective way of resolving difficulties around school attendance. Research and evidence show a supportive, collaborative approach is the most effective way in moving the situation forward and promoting school attendance and emotional wellbeing.

Acknowledging the stress and challenge that have been experienced by the young person and family will be important to establish empathy and trust. Following this with a solution-focused approach and use of exception finding questions can help shift the focus away from the presenting problem, to consider aspects within a situation which are working well or supporting the young person not to get worse. Possible questions or sentence starters may include:

- Tell me about the times when X is not feeling X
- Tell me about the times when X is feeling less X
- Tell me about the times when X has coped well
- Tell me about the days/times of day when you think something has gone well for X. What is different during these times?
- Tell me about the times when X has managed to go to school. What was different about these times?
- Tell me what other people have done that has been useful/helpful for X

Further examples of potential questions to explore background information, as well as the strengths and protective factors within the family, are provided in Appendix 3.

Emotionally Based School Avoidance and Autism Spectrum Conditions

Anxiety is common for young people with autism and whilst there is little research into the prevalence of those with autism and emotionally based school avoidance, evidence and experience suggest that due to the anxieties that children with autism experience they are likely to be at increased risk of emotionally based school avoidance.

Young people with autism often find aspects of the environment or social interaction overwhelming due to differences in thinking style, behaviour patterns and sensory experiences. This can cause anxiety and stress if it is not recognised and addressed.

Schools are complex social environments and children with autism can find this exhausting and overwhelming. The image below highlights factors that can lead to a young person's anxiety bucket overflowing:



Spotting the signs:

Typical symptoms of high anxiety for all people often look very similar to behaviours which are associated with autism. This can lead to a lack of recognition that a young person is experiencing anxiety, if the observed behaviour is interpreted as 'just part of autism'. In addition, given that young people with autism can have difficulties recognising and expressing emotions (alexithymia), it can be hard for them to tell others about their well-being and mental state. Additionally, some young people 'mask' their difficulties in school, which means that they may try to 'cover-up', camouflage or compensate for their difficulties. Women and girls seem to be particularly good at masking and consequently their difficulties often go unrecognised. Recognising when a young person is in distress and helping them to communicate about their feelings are important steps in reducing stress.

Symptoms of High Anxiety:

- Difficulties concentrating
- Poor sleep patterns
- Poor eating habits
- Quick to anger, outburst/meltdowns
- Constant worrying – preoccupations
- Complaining of feeling unwell
- Difficulty making decisions
- Repetitive - behaviours
- Retreating from others
- Poor school attendance

Prevention – Creating the right environment for mental health:

“Supporting the autism will lead naturally to reduction in the crippling and miserable anxiety that many of our autistic children and young people face simply at the thought of going to school” Sarah Hendrickx 2015

- Teach young people how to recognise emotions within themselves and other people
- The Autism Education Trust (AET) School Standards (<https://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/product-category/resources/>) are excellent documents which help to ensure that pupils receive the support that they need.
- In Kirklees, the Graduated Approach (Communication and Interaction) sits alongside the AET recommendations and is also helpful to refer to for guidance about good practice interventions.
- Quality First Teaching:
 - Promoting pride in being Autistic!!
 - Provide Motivating, Meaningful & Purposeful learning activities
 - Create predictable learning environments; reduce unexpected change
 - Provide 1-page profile available for all staff so that teachers know about the “Dos and Don’ts” for students with autism
 - Develop an Emotional Regulation kit bag & one for emergencies
 - Be aware of sensory preferences and sensitivities. The Sensory Occupational Therapy Team in Kirklees has an excellent website for ideas about adapting environments and putting strategies in place to meet student’s sensory needs (<https://www.locala.org.uk/services/sensory-occupational-therapy-service>).
- Energy Accounting Activity (Maja Toudal) - sitting down with a student and creating two lists. A list of things that sap energy (withdrawals) and a list of things that replenish energy (deposits). A numerical value is then assigned to each withdrawal and deposit

to give it a weighting. For example, 10 points means the activity gives/takes *a little* energy and 100 points means it gives/takes *a lot* of energy. The idea is that when a withdrawal, or numerous withdrawals are made, deposits also must be made to prevent the account running into overdraft and a meltdown occurring. The objective is to have a healthy energy account by taking scheduled deposit time throughout the day.

Deposit:	Sleep (+50)	Special interest (+30)
Computer game (+20)	Favourite food (+15)	Achieving (+15)



Withdrawal:	Socializing (-30)	Change in routine (-40)
Making a mistake (-15)	Sensory sensitivity (10)	
Negative thoughts (-5)	Being teased or excluded (-50)	
Sensitivity to other people's moods (-30)	Crowds (-15)	

The 'Energy Bucket' or 'Energy Bank Account' shouldn't become empty, as empty accounts and buckets increase the likelihood of emotionally school avoidance. This approach should be considered when we design visual timetables, ensuring that fun things are included in a young person's day. Talking to our students about what should be included in their daily timetable is helpful to ensure the 'energy account' is always balanced and supports them to maintain their emotional regulation.

Assessment and Intervention:

As a first principle of good practice, we should regularly gather student views about school to help identify potential areas of anxiety and reduce the risk of emotionally based school avoidance. Children with autism can have a very idiosyncratic view of the world, which is often very different to the way other people think about things, and what they consider to be important. Students can also struggle to express their views about school and are helped by

having visual prompts available to support them to organise their thoughts, feelings and ideas. From Page 13 in this guidance details a range of visual approaches that can be useful in supporting all young people to share their views. These include:

- Feelings Maps
- Drawing the Ideal School
- Scaling

A personalised action plan should be created with the young person and their parent/carer which addresses the strengths and needs of the individual. This should be reviewed regularly, and adjustments made as required.

Strong communication and belief in the effectiveness of the steps identified in the plan are essential in supporting young people and families in overcoming the barrier of emotionally based school avoidance. It cannot be emphasized enough how important it is that there is a true sense of team and spirit of collaboration in the drive towards supporting our students with autism to overcome their anxieties around the school environment and attendance.

Prevention

Whole school policies and practice can have a significant impact on young people's mental health and wellbeing including emotionally based school avoidance. This diagram from Public Health England and Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition (2015) highlights the key areas to be addressed.



Source: Public Health England and Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition (2015) Promoting children and young people's emotional health and wellbeing: A whole school and college approach

Research into emotionally based school avoidance supports the importance of these areas, in particular promoting the voice and agency of young people, working with parents and carers, and adopting a graduated approach to interventions to support social, emotional and mental health needs as well as concerns around learning, and communication and interaction.

A range of strategies and interventions can help to support young people who have emotional needs within school settings and these are best adopted as a whole school approach. Considering when individual children require referral to other agencies is also important.

Please contact the Educational Psychology Service if you need further support.

Local Support and Resources

Kirklees Local Offer website provides information about support, services and activities for young people (aged 0-25) with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in Kirklees. <https://www.kirkleeslocaloffer.org.uk>
[Home](#) | [Kirklees Local Offer](#)

Educational Psychology Service offers a range of services to help support the needs of your school. Termly planning meetings are provided as an opportunity to discuss and prioritise your needs and plan any necessary input.
01924 483744 dewsbury.psychology@kirklees.gov.uk

Thriving Kirklees is a single point of contact in Kirklees, for anyone concerned about a child's emotional health and wellbeing. They can provide mental health support for people aged 0-18 in the Kirklees area. They offer counselling, 1-1 support with mental health practitioners, activity groups and short term workshops, as well as advice, information and support over the phone or regular support calls. **0300 304 5555** www.thrivingkirklees.org.uk

Kirklees Information Advice and Support Service (KIASS) provides information, advice and support relating to a child or young person's Special Educational Needs and/or disability and is available to anybody living within the Kirklees area. **0300 3301504**. www.kiass.org.uk

Education Safeguarding Service is part of the wider learning service which consists of SEND, School Admissions, School Governance and Virtual School. The service fulfils both statutory and non-statutory functions in relation to compulsory school aged children. **01484 221919**. [Education Safeguarding Resources](#) | [Kirklees Business Solutions](#)

Further Resources

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

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

Information about Anxiety Young Minds: [Anxiety \(youngminds.org.uk\)](http://www.youngminds.org.uk)

Mighty Moe by Lacey Woloshyn

<http://www.cw.bc.ca/library/pdf/pamphlets/Mighty%20Moe1.pdf>

Worksheets for anxiety – Anxiety BC <https://www.anxietybc.com/parenting/worksheets>

Anxiety self help guide – Mood Juice [MOODJUICE - Anxiety - Self-help Guide \(scot.nhs.uk\)](http://www.scot.nhs.uk/moodjuice/)

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Skills Training Workbook – Hertfordshire Partnership NHS <http://inabook.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/CBT-workbook-good-to-use.pdf>

Anxiety by Paul Stallard -Examples of activities <http://tandfbis.s3.amazonaws.com/rt-media/pp/resources/CBTCHILD/worksheets.pdf>

Understanding anxiety and panic attacks Mind [Anxiety and panic attacks | Mind](http://www.mind.org.uk/about-us/press-releases/understanding-anxiety-and-panic-attacks)

The Anxious Child: A booklet for parents and carers wanting to know more about anxiety in children and young people. <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/anxious-child>

Books for Working with Children & Young People:

- A Volcano in My Tummy. Whitehouse and Pudney.
- The Incredible 5-Point Scale. Buron and Curtis.
- Silly Billy. Anthony Browne.
- How to catch a star. Oliver Jeffries.
- The Huge Bag of Worries. Virginia Ironside.
- Moppy is (angry, sad, scared). Asher and Scarfe.
- Everybody Feels.... (happy etc). Butterfield and Sterling.
- Have you filled a bucket today?
- Range of books by Dr Karen Triesman - <http://www.safehandsthinkingminds.co.uk/>
- Range of books by Margot Sunderland.
- Think Good Feel Good. Paul Stallard.

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Rae, T. (2020). The Well-being Toolkit for Mental Health Leads in Schools.

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West Sussex County Council Educational Psychology Service (2004) Emotionally Based School Refusal: Guidance for Schools and Support Agencies. West Sussex County Council, West Sussex Educational Psychology Service.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Exploring Functions of Emotionally Based School Avoidance Behaviours

What purpose does avoiding school serve for.....(name)?

1.To avoid school related stressors:	2.To avoid school situations and/or activities:
3.To gain needed attention:	4.To engage in preferred activities:

Appendix 2: Systemic Push/Pull Factors template



Appendix 3: Questions to support discussions with parent/carers

AREAS TO COVER	EXAMPLE QUESTIONS
Developmental and educational history	What was s/he like as a young child? Can you tell me about their early experiences at school? The primary school, at the start of secondary school?
Strengths, interests and aspirations	What is s/he good at? What do they like doing? Do they have any hopes for the future? Do they know what they want their life to be like when they are an adult?
Any potential changes or losses within the family or child's life	Can you tell me about your family? Who is in it, who is like whom? Who is s/he closest to? Have there been any changes within the family recently? (You could ask them to draw a family tree/ genogram).
Relationships	Does s/he talk about any other children? What does s/he say? Does s/he talk about any adults within school? What does s/he say? Who does s/he get on with...who doesn't s/he get on with?
Academic progress	School should be aware if the young person has identified SEN needs and should ask about these needs and the support in place. If there is no identified SEN school should ask if they have any concerns, or if the child has spoken about difficulties.
The child's view what are their specific fears/worries	Has s/he spoken to you about what s/he finds difficult about school? What do they say?
The child's views, what is going well in school	Has s/he mentioned anything that is going well in school? (e.g., teachers, lessons, friends)
Behaviour and symptoms of anxiety	When s/he is worried what does it look like? What do they say they are feeling?
Typical day – when they go to school and when they don't go to school	Please describe a typical day when s/he goes to school from the moment s/he...gets up until s/he goes to bed..... and when s/he doesn't go to school? What does s/he do when they do not go to school? What do other family members do?
Impact on various members of the family	How does their non-attendance impact on you? And on other family members? Who is better at dealing with the situation? Why?
Parental views on the reasons for the emotionally based school avoidance	Why do you think s/he has difficulty attending school? (Ask each parent separately). If (other parent/ sibling/Grandparent) were here, what would they say? Are there any differences of views about the reasons and what should be done within the family?
Exceptions to the problem	Have there been times when s/he managed to get into school? What was different about those times?
Previous attempts to address the problem	What has been the most helpful thing that someone else has done in dealing with the problem so far? What has helped in the past when things have been difficult? What strategies have been most helpful so far in managing their anxiety?

Appendix 4: Information Gathering and Integration Form

Name:		School:	
Year group:		Key School Staff:	
Other agencies involved:			
Description of behaviour:			
Risk factors:			
School	Child	Family	
Strengths and protective factors:			
School	Child	Family	
Formulation & integration of various factors:			
Function of behaviour			

Appendix 5: Individual Support Plan for Young Person with Emotionally Based School Avoidance needs

Name:		Year Group:	Date:
Contributors to plan:			
Young person's strengths and interests:			
Shared desired outcomes:	Agreed Action (Intervention / Strategy)	Pre-intervention evaluation	Post-intervention evaluation
<i>What do we hope to see as a result?</i> <i>What is a realistic expectation given our starting point?</i> <i>How can we write this as a SMART target?</i>	<i>What?</i> <i>Who?</i> <i>How often?</i> <i>For how long?</i>	<i>What does it look like now?</i>	<i>Have we achieved our shared desired outcome?</i> <i>If not, have we made steps forward towards our shared outcome?</i>
Date to review:			

Kirklees Educational Psychology Service would like to thank West Sussex and Solihull Educational Psychology Services for allowing permission to adapt and use material and graphics from their original documents.

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