



Milton Keynes  
City Council



Central and  
North West London  
NHS Foundation Trust

# Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) Guidance for Schools and Settings in Milton Keynes.

Part One: Information

November 2024  
Version 2

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# Executive Summary

## About this guidance

This current version of the EBSA guidance document has been revised in partnership with the MK Moving Forward EBSA steering group. It should be read in conjunction with Part Two: Practical Support as well as a range of relevant policies and guidance (see page 4).

## Rationale

This guidance recognises the important life outcomes associated with good attendance and that schools are vital for promoting not only academic achievement but the development of key life skills. This guidance emphasises the role of the school environment in promoting positive attendance for all as well as the need to understand the emotional barriers to school attendance and to intervene early (see page 5).

## What is EBSA?

EBSA is a term used to describe a group of pupils who have difficulty attending school due to emotional factors. We use the term emotionally based school avoidance to reflect not only the high levels of emotional distress underpinning EBSA but also the fact that some pupils might be able to attend school but present with avoidant behaviours (see page 6).

## EBSA and anxiety

Anxiety is considered to be a key feature of EBSA. Avoidance can be considered a stress response to the perceived threat of the school environment. When avoidance is used to cope with anxious feelings, a cycle of ongoing non-attendance can be perpetuated, making it even more difficult for the CYP to get back to school (see page 7).

## EBSA and transition

Whilst the majority of children can adapt well at key transition points, others find this a very challenging time. Research findings demonstrate that the Year 6 to 7 transition is a particular time of risk for EBSA, especially for more vulnerable pupils (see page 8).

## Guiding principles

The Milton Keynes approach to supporting children and young people who experience EBSA is underpinned by the following guiding principles (also see figure 8 on page 18):

1. Promoting positive attendance for all (see page 9)
2. Identifying EBSA needs in a timely way (see page 10)
3. Collaborating through person-centred approaches (see page 11)
4. Understanding individual needs and contexts (see page 12)
5. Implementing support and adaptations (see page 16)

## Fostering emotional wellbeing

Alongside school based EBSA support plans, strategies to enhance emotional wellbeing, both at home and school, should also be considered (see page 19).

# About this guidance

The Milton Keynes EBSA guidance documents comprise of two parts; Part One: Information and Part Two: Practical Support. Both parts draw upon evidence-based theory and practice to provide useful guidance for schools, parents and other professionals when supporting children and young people who experience Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA).

These documents were first developed in March 2022 by Milton Keynes Educational Psychology Service in conjunction with the MK EBSA working group. The current (revised) version of Part One was produced as part of a partnership approach through the 'MK – Moving Forward EBSA Steering group' in 2024, with representatives across health, education, and social care.

These guidance documents should also be read in conjunction with other relevant legislation, policies and guidance documents related to this area, including but not limited to:

- [Working together to improve school attendance](#): Statutory guidance for maintained schools, academies, independent schools, and local authorities (DfE, 2024)
- [Arranging education for children who cannot attend school because of health needs](#) (DfE, 2023)
- [Summary of responsibilities where a mental health issue is affecting attendance](#) (DfE, 2023)
- [Supporting pupils at school with medical conditions](#): Statutory guidance for governing bodies of maintained schools and proprietors of academies in England (DfE, 2015)
- [Providing remote education: guidance for schools](#) (DfE, 2024)
- [Keeping children safe in education](#): Statutory guidance for schools and colleges (DfE, 2024)
- [Section 100 - Children and Families Act 2014](#)
- [Equality Act 2010](#)
- [Section 19 - Education Act 1996](#)

Milton Keynes Policies linked to the above guidance:

- [Reduced Timetable – Best Practice Guidance](#): (MKCC, 2020)
- [Children and Young People Unable to Attend School because of Health Reasons](#): (MKCC, 2022)

Both parts of the guidance and any relevant resources can be found on the Milton Keynes Local Offer webpages: [MK Local Offer EBSA](#).

With particular thanks to Solihull, Staffordshire and West Sussex Educational Psychology Services whose work in this area supported the development of these materials.

# Rationale

## **Positive outcomes associated with school attendance**

Research findings consistently demonstrate a range of negative outcomes associated with poor school attendance. Children and young people (CYP) are less likely to succeed academically at both primary and secondary school, and are more likely to not be in education, employment, or training when they leave school (Department for Education, 2018; 2020). Persistent patterns of non-attendance over time are also associated with poorer social and emotional development and mental health difficulties (Flakierska-Praquin et al, 1997; Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Lee, 2019). Regular attendance at school is not only important for promoting academic attainment, but also the development of key life skills (Pellegrini, 2007). In addition, schools provide CYP with positive adult role models and a foundation for their interactions in society, they are “*more than just classrooms, they are communities*” (Christmas, 2023).

## **School environments that promote attendance**

Relevant literature in this area indicates that psychological safety and connectedness (belonging) with others are key protective factors for reducing the risk of EBSA (Corcoran & Kelly, 2023; Halligan & Cryer, 2022). Thus, schools have a crucial role to play in promoting attendance through the development of safe and welcoming environments. This guidance should be read in conjunction with the ‘Working together to improve school attendance’ publication (DfE, 2024) which emphasises the need for creating calm, safe and supportive school environments, where pupils want to be and feel keen and able to learn (DfE, 2024).

## **Understanding the underlying emotional barriers to attendance**

The choice of terminology (‘emotionally based school avoidance’) used within this guidance recognises the role that overwhelming emotions play in school attendance difficulties. Research findings indicate that CYP experiencing EBSA are often academically capable, motivated to attend school and have aspirations for their future (Corcoran & Kelly, 2023; Higgins, 2022). Non-attendance is therefore a ‘last resort’; a way of coping with the perceived threat of the school environment (Halligan & Cryer, 2022) and the resulting distress. This guidance highlights the need to explore and develop a shared understanding of the emotional, often anxiety driven (Finning et al., 2019), barriers to attending school. It is also aligned with the government’s ‘support first’ approach (DfE, 2024) to managing attendance concerns.

## **Early intervention to prevent entrenched non-attendance**

As is often observed, the longer EBSA remains unaddressed, the more likely that the difficulties with attending school become entrenched (Wimmer, 2010). Whilst some CYP may experience long-term and enduring patterns of EBSA, the primary aim of this guidance is to promote the early identification of EBSA needs (barriers to attendance) and the provision of timely and responsive support. In doing so, difficulties with attending school can be addressed in a proactive and preventative manner.



# What is EBSA?

Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) is a term used to describe a group of children who have difficulty attending school due to emotional factors (Halligan & Cryer, 2022). It is more than a perceived dislike for school, it is an avoidance of school rooted in emotional and physical distress which can escalate to such an extent that a CYP feels overwhelmed and no longer able to attend school. Whilst EBSA is often associated with heightened levels of anxiety (Finning et al., 2019), it is not a medical condition in itself. Rather it can be considered a neurological stress response to (way of coping with) the perceived threat of the school environment (Halligan & Cryer, 2022).

There are other terms for EBSA used across the literature, including school refusal, school non-attendance, school withdrawal, and school phobia. However, EBSA is adopted for the purpose of this guidance as it places an emphasis on understanding the underlying emotional needs affecting attendance. Research also makes a clear distinction between non-attendance at school due to truancing and EBSA, with the latter generally with parental knowledge and driven by specific emotional distress associated with attending school (Thambirajah et al., 2008).

Additionally, the term EBSA (as opposed to Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance or EBSNA), is used to acknowledge that CYP may experience EBSA needs and display avoidance behaviours whilst maintaining good or even full attendance. In these cases, the CYP might be avoiding aspects of the school day such as particular lessons, teachers, social situations, times of the day, or areas of the school.

Accordingly, Holder (2022) describes a continuum of EBSA behaviours, ranging from occasional reluctance to attend school to complete avoidance resulting in persistent non-attendance (see Figure 1). A CYP with EBSA needs might move along this continuum in both directions, perhaps as a result of a change in circumstances, e.g., levels of support, a school move, a new teacher, a friendship breakdown, a bereavement, or a parental separation.



**Fig 1. Continuum of EBSA taken from the ‘EBSA Horizons’ CPD materials (Holder, 2022).**

EBSA can present differently across individuals but can include one, or a combination of, the following: fear, anxiety (including physical symptoms), misery, complaints of feeling ill without obvious cause, reluctance to leave home, delays in following morning routines, difficulties separating from parent/carers on arrival to school and angry outbursts. In some cases, the avoidance behaviour might result in noticeable patterns of lateness and days absent from school. As per the ‘working together’ guidance (DfE, 2024), robust processes should be in place to identify and act upon any emerging trends within the attendance data.

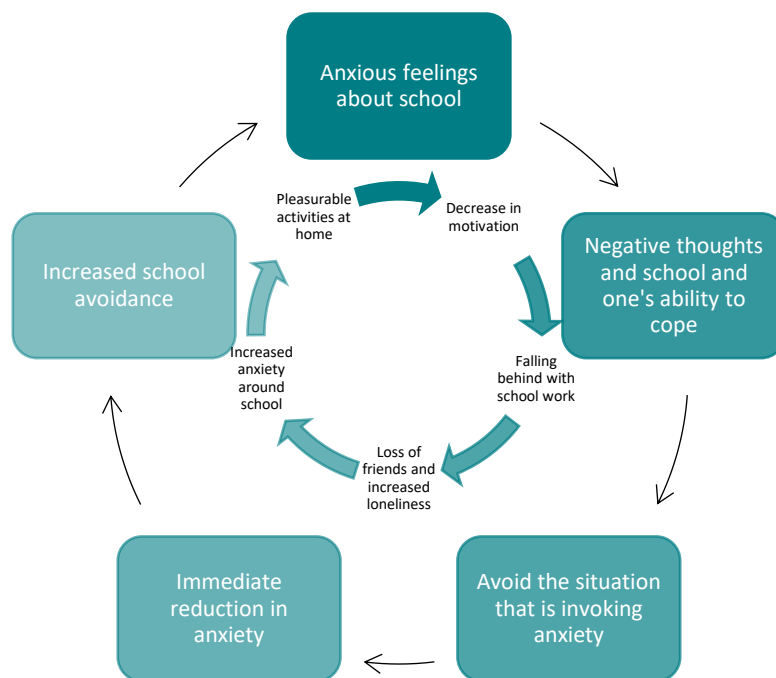
# EBSA and anxiety

Anxiety is considered to be a key feature of EBSA (Pellegrini, 2007; Lee, 2019). Anxiety is a normal part of life. However, some CYP experience such heightened levels of anxiety that it negatively impacts their ability to attend and cope in school. For some CYP anxious thoughts can also be accompanied by physical symptoms i.e. nausea, vomiting, shaking, sweating, heavy/fast breathing, and panic attacks.

Our para-sympathetic nervous system is designed to respond to potential threats and prepare us for fight, flight, or freeze. People who suffer from anxiety have often not learnt to manage their emotional reactions to stress. Without appropriate strategies the anxiety can feel as though it is increasing, growing, and beginning to overwhelm the CYP. They then turn to the adults around them to seek support in managing and containing the emotions. Humans often project their feelings onto others; therefore, an anxious child can provoke anxiety in those around them. If a CYP senses that the adults do not know what to do, that can increase their anxiety.

When anxiety is linked to school avoidance, this can lead to a vicious cycle which can reinforce and maintain EBSA over time (see Figure 2). For example, when a CYP avoids school, this can instantly reduce anxiety and reinforce the idea that missing school is a good strategy to avoid negative feelings. However, with avoidance the CYP's anxious predictions go unchallenged, and they may begin to question their ability to cope, leading to an increased persistence of school avoidance behaviours.

Prolonged time out of school can also lead to secondary maintenance factors. For example, avoiding school means that young people might fall behind on schoolwork and miss out on social opportunities with peers, making it even more difficult to return to school.



**Fig 2. The anxiety avoidance cycle - taken from 'Emotionally Based School Avoidance: Good Practice Guidance for Schools and Support Agencies' (West Sussex EPS, 2018).**

## Habituation

When a CYP is exposed to a feared situation (in this case school), there is an initial rapid rise in anxiety. They assume that because of the way they are feeling that the anxiety will continue to rise and there is an urge to escape the anxiety provoking situation or demand. However, the body will begin to 'habituate' (become accustomed to the situation) and gradually the anxiety levels will reduce, and this reduces further with each exposure. But if the exposure is not maintained and the CYP exits the situation in a heightened state the result is often an even steeper rise in anxiety during subsequent exposures, no habituation takes place. The CYP does not learn that the anxiety will subside and that they can cope.

## EBSA and transition

Research shows that the prevalence of prolonged absences is greater around times of transition from one educational setting into another. This is true for all phase changes at:

- Home to infant school
- Junior school entry
- Secondary school transition
- Leaving school to go to college.

Many CYP find the transition to secondary school particularly difficult as many changes are occurring (developmental, environmental, and organisational). According to the School Transition and Adjustment Research Study (STARS) report, common worries amongst Year 6 pupils include being bullied, losing old friends, getting lost, homework and discipline and detentions (Rice et al., 2015). The emotional impact of moving from a relatively protective environment into a larger often unfamiliar organisation where the CYP is faced with many new challenges, can be very daunting for many pupils.

Whilst the majority of CYP adapt well to these challenges, some (particularly those with lower attainment and those with special educational needs) find it harder to cope with these changes and adapt successfully to the transition (Rice et al., 2015). In addition, CYP concerned about the secondary transfer tend to view aspects of school more negatively, display greater anxiety, feel pessimistic about the change, experience low moods and have existing social relationship issues (Rice, Frederickson & Seymour, 2011). As good attendance during the first week of term has been found to predict better attendance over the rest of the year (Children's Commissioner, 2022), identification and support for those potentially at risk of EBSA during or following transition is therefore imperative.

### Pause for reflection...

How can we identify those children that might struggle more with transitions, especially Year 6 to 7?

How can we apply our understanding of anxiety to best support this vulnerable group to transition successfully?



# Guiding principles

In line with national good practice, the Milton Keynes approach to supporting CYP who experience EBSA is underpinned by the following guiding principles:

1. Promoting positive attendance for all
2. Identifying EBSA needs in a timely way
3. Collaborating through person-centred approaches
4. Understanding individual needs and contexts (barriers to attendance)
5. Implementing support and adaptations



The primary focus of this guidance is to promote positive school attendance for all pupils alongside personalised support for individuals at risk of EBSA, based on a timely and robust identification of their needs and barriers to attendance.

## 1. Promoting positive attendance for all



The DfE's 'Working together to improve school attendance' guidance notes that securing good attendance "*cannot be seen in isolation*" (DfE, 2024 p.8) and requires consideration of the interaction between attendance and aspects of the school environment such as the curriculum, support for special educational needs and the mental health and wellbeing of pupils. (DfE, 2024). Furthermore, it highlights the importance of creating calm, safe and supportive school environments, stressing that schools need to be places where pupils want to be and feel keen and able to learn (DfE, 2024).

A wealth of literature in the field of school attendance points to the importance of a welcoming school environment, trusting relationships, belonging and psychological safety (Babcock LDP Educational Psychology Service, 2016; Corcoran, Bond & Knox 2022; Sobba, 2019; Wilkins, 2008). This includes efforts to develop an anti-bullying culture, effective classroom management practices, (Halligan & Cryer, 2022; Havik, Brue & Ertesvåg, 2015) and provision to meet the educational needs of all pupils. In regard to the latter, schools are advised to utilise MKCC's ordinarily available provision documents (see the [MK Local Offer](#)).

Moreover, adopting a whole-school approach to promoting emotional wellbeing has been identified as a protective factor for child and adolescent mental health, with eight key principles recommended (Public Health England, 2021). A brief overview of these principles can be found on page 69 of the Practical Support document. In addition, an example of a whole-school emotional health and wellbeing audit tool is available from page 71 onwards.

## 2. Identifying EBSA needs in a timely way



The longer a CYP's EBSA difficulties remain unaddressed, the poorer the outcomes as the avoidance behaviours can become entrenched over time (West Sussex EPS, 2018). It is therefore crucial that CYP experiencing EBSA, or who are at risk of EBSA, are identified early. In order to recognise the possible indicators of EBSA, schools and other professionals need to remain curious about what a CYP's behaviour might be communicating.

### Early indicators of EBSA:

- Sporadic absences and/or lateness.
- Parent reporting that CYP does not want to come into school.
- Physical signs of stress and anxiety (e.g., stomach ache, sickness, headache) or complaining of being ill.
- Behavioural changes or fluctuations e.g., interactions with others, reduced motivation, and engagement in learning tasks.

### Ongoing indicators of EBSA:

- Periods of prolonged absence.
- Persistent lateness.
- Parent/carer unable to support CYP to attend school.
- Identifiable patterns of within school non-attendance e.g., specific days, subjects, staff members.
- Providing minor reasons for school absences.
- CYP experiences anxiety in relation to home factors e.g., parental separation, divorce, conflict, loss, bereavement.
- CYP displays greater reliance upon family members e.g., separation anxiety, increased proximity.
- Concerns around academic progress due to school non-attendance/missed education.
- CYP displays increased anxiety in relation to their learning and/or poor self-concept as a learner.
- Low self-esteem and/or lack of confidence.
- Struggling in relation to peer relationships and/or social situations.
- Physical signs of stress believed to be linked to stress (e.g., stomach ache, sickness, headache) or complaining of feeling ill.
- Displays of emotional dysregulation and/or distress.

**Taken from Solihull Community Educational Psychology Service & Solar (2020).**

In addition to usual attendance monitoring systems, schools should remain mindful of possible risk factors present for individual CYP (see Section 4). The Practical Support document (pages 5-12) includes some useful tools to identify those CYP who may be at risk of EBSA.

### 3. Collaborating through person-centred approaches



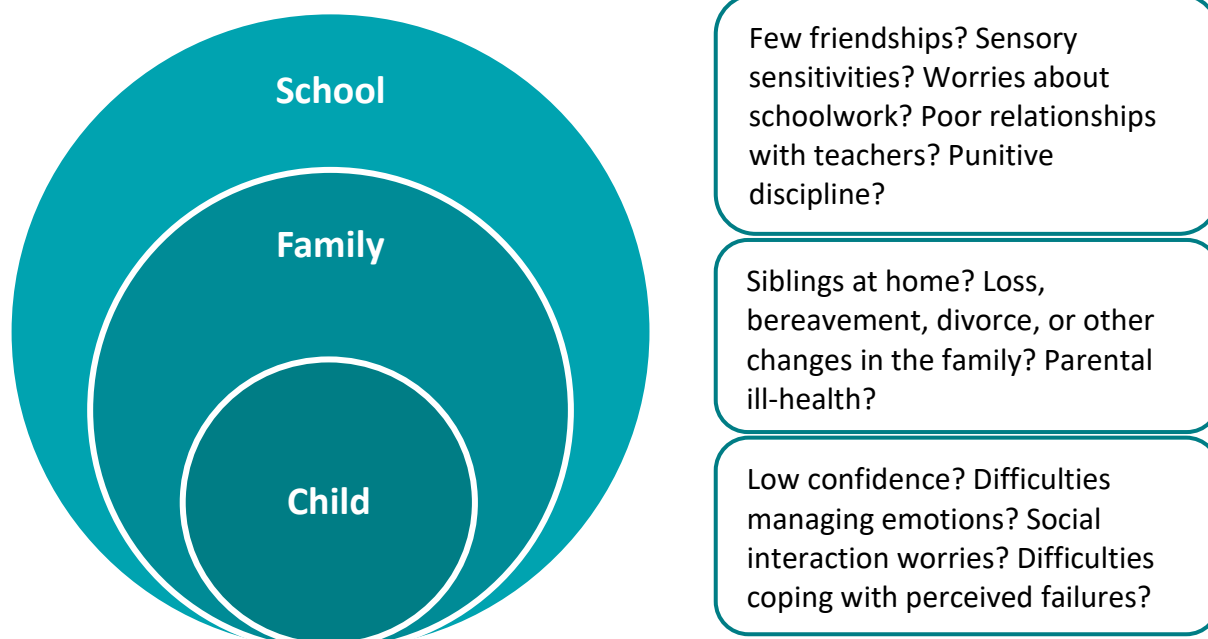
Although it can be tempting to try and find one simple reason for the EBSA behaviour, the reasons are often complex and multi-faceted; and include environmental factors present at home and school, as well as individual CYP factors (Corcoran et al., 2022; Gregory & Purcell, 2014). Trying to find a single cause often creates blame, with respective parties likely to become anxious and defensive, (West Sussex, 2018). Furthermore, viewing EBSA from only one perspective may serve to limit the effectiveness of support plans and strategies.

Research findings have identified that school engagement is promoted when pupils feel that school staff are good at listening to them and exploring the underlying reasons for the avoidance (Wilkins, 2008). Furthermore, working together with parents ensuring that they feel listened to, involved, and supported, can have a positive impact (Corcoran et al., 2022, Sawyer 2022).

“Parents and carers need to be listened to and believed. Parents know their child the best and teachers could use their knowledge to guide and support further.”

Parents and Carers Alliance (PACA) MK EBSA listening event, March 2024.

It is therefore essential that time is taken to understand the EBSA concerns from different points of view to create a shared understanding that considers a thorough range of child, family, and school-based factors (see figure 3).



**Fig 3. Examples of child, family, and school-based factors.**

A number of tools are available within the Practical Support document (page 14 onwards) for gathering rich and detailed information from pupils, parents, and school staff respectively. These include a range of visual and practical approaches to gaining the CYP’s voice.

## 4. Understanding individual needs and contexts



Where significant risks of EBSA are identified, it is imperative to further explore the child, family and school factors that may be contributing to or maintaining the EBSA behaviours and acting as barriers to attending school.

Assessment of EBSA needs should include the following aspects:

- The CYP's strengths and exceptions (e.g., times or situations when their anxiety is lower)
- Developmental and family history
- Possible functions of school non-attendance
- Risk and resilience factors
- Any 'push' and 'pull' factors.

It is important to acknowledge that any factors identified are likely to be dynamic and changeable. What led to the initial school avoidance, may not necessarily be what continues to maintain the avoidance; and that what appears to be the cause of the issue may in fact be the consequence.

Due to the nature of EBSA, there cannot be one single way to complete an assessment. However, a range of tools and approaches which schools may find useful are included from page 14 onwards of the Practical Support document.

### Functions of School Avoidance:

Kearney and Silverman (1993) identified four main functions considered to underpin school non-attendance, in which the CYP's behaviour might serve to **avoid** or **gain** something (see Figure 4).

To avoid something:

#### To avoid uncomfortable feelings brought on by school

e.g. anxiety or low mood; feelings of disconnection/not belonging

#### To avoid stressful situations

e.g. academic demands; exams; social pressures/interactions that are challenging; breaktimes/lunchtimes; aspects of the school environment, including noise, crowds, buildings or classrooms; transitions

To gain something:

#### To reduce separation anxiety or gain attention from significant others

e.g. time at home with parents/ carers/ family members

#### To engage in preferred activities

e.g. watching TV, playing video games, spending time with friends, going shopping

**Fig 4. Functions of School Non-Attendance – Kearney and Silverman (1993), adapted from Staffordshire EPS (2020) and West Sussex (2018).**

Staffordshire EPS (2020) highlighted the importance of thinking about what unmet need/s avoiding school fulfils for the CYP, as well as what the non-attendance is communicating in terms of expressing feelings or unmet needs. They suggest the following questions:

- Avoiding school is the solution to what problem for the CYP?
- What outcome is the CYP’s non-attendance achieving for them?
- What are the CYP’s non-attendance behaviours telling us about how they are feeling?
- What are the CYP’s non-attendance behaviours telling us about what they need?

When attendance difficulties are noted, it is useful to complete an analysis as to which of the functions, or combination of functions, might be most significant for the CYP (see pages 27 – 28 of the Practical Support document). This understanding can then be used to inform the intervention and support strategies that will be most effective.

**Risk and Resilience Factors:**

Research has identified a range of contributing ‘risk’ factors to EBSA. West Sussex EPS (2018) note that it is often a combination or predisposing factors (in school, family and/or child) interacting with a change of circumstances that leads to EBSA behaviours.

Contributing ‘Risk’ Factors		
School Factors	Family Factors	Child Factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bullying (the most common factor)</li> <li>• Difficulties in specific subject</li> <li>• Transition to secondary school, key state or change of school</li> <li>• Structure of the school day</li> <li>• Academic demands/high level of pressure and performance-orientated classrooms</li> <li>• Ineffective SEN provision</li> <li>• Activities that the child or young person cannot manage (e.g. PE, performing in public)</li> <li>• Transport or journey to school</li> <li>• Exams</li> <li>• Peer or staff relationships difficulties</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Separation and divorce or change in family dynamic</li> <li>• Parent physical or mental health problems</li> <li>• Siblings at home e.g. home educated or due to health needs</li> <li>• Overprotective parenting style</li> <li>• Dysfunctional family interactions</li> <li>• Being the youngest child in the family</li> <li>• Loss and bereavement</li> <li>• High levels of family stress</li> <li>• Family history of EBSA</li> <li>• Young carer responsibilities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Temperamental style- reluctance to interact and withdrawal from unfamiliar settings, people or objects</li> <li>• Challenges with emotional self-awareness and self-regulation</li> <li>• Fear of failure and poor self-confidence</li> <li>• Physical illness</li> <li>• Age (5-6, 11-12 and 13 and 14)</li> <li>• Learning difficulties, developmental problems or Autistic Spectrum Condition if unidentified or unsupported</li> <li>• Anxiety interacting with peers</li> <li>• Separation anxiety from parent/worry parent will leave/worry about parent wellbeing</li> <li>• Traumatic events</li> </ul>

**Table 1. Taken from Thambirajah et al (2008), West Sussex EPS (2018), and Staffordshire EPS (2020).**



When supporting CYP experiencing EBSA it is also important to think about the areas of strength and sources of resilience available to them. These can serve to protect them from maintaining EBSA behaviours and promote successful inclusion in school. Again, these have been divided into school, family, and child factors below.

Resilience Factors		
School Factors	Family Factors	Child Factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Experiencing success in school</li> <li>Positive relationships with staff</li> <li>Positive relationships with peers</li> <li>Willingness to work in partnership with family and support agencies</li> <li>A flexible approach</li> <li>A good understanding of the CYP's feelings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Positive relationships in the family and/or community</li> <li>Willingness to work in partnership with school and support agencies</li> <li>Positive parenting skills</li> <li>Developing understanding of the child or young person's needs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Individual strengths and interests</li> <li>Developing ambition and aspiration</li> <li>Motivation for change</li> <li>Increasing confidence, self-esteem, self-efficacy and value in themselves</li> </ul>

Table 2. Taken from Staffordshire EPS (2020).

#### 'Push' and 'Pull' Factors:

Contributory factors to EBSA can also be understood in terms of 'push' and 'pull' factors. According to Thambirajah and colleagues (2008, p33), EBSA "occurs when stress exceeds support, when risks are greater than resilience and when 'pull' factors that promote (EBSA) overcome the 'push' factors that encourage attendance."

For the purpose of this guidance, a four-part model is used to conceptualise this (see Figure 5). Factors that increase the risk of school avoidance are those that PUSH a child away from school (e.g., a friendship fallout) and PULL them towards home (e.g., worries about a parent's wellbeing). Factors that decrease the risk of school avoidance are those that PULL a child towards school (e.g., enjoyable subjects) and PUSH them away from home (e.g., boredom).

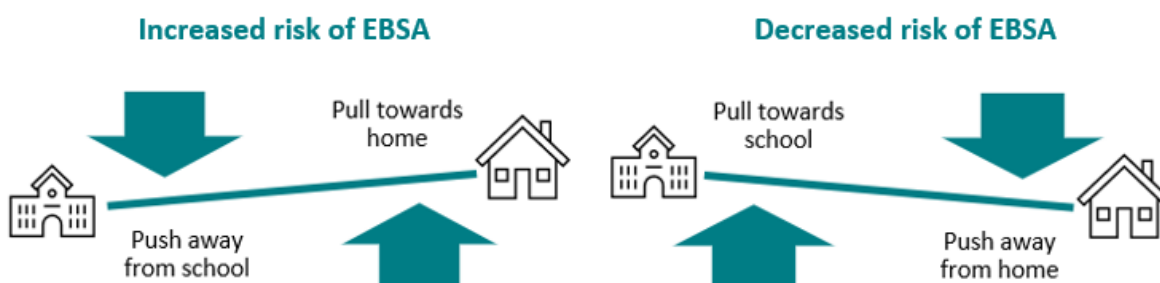


Fig 5. Four-part model of push and pull factors.

Tools that can be used to explore and document a CYP's individual push and pull factors can be found on pages 32 – 40 of the Practical Support document, including a card sort activity on pages 35 – 37 (see Figure 6).



Fig 6. Picture card sorting task taken from the MK EBSA Practical Support document.

### EBSA and autism:

Research findings suggest that autistic CYP may be up to six times more likely to experience EBSA compared to their non-autistic peers (Munkhaugen et al., 2017) with EBSA cited as the most common reason for non-attendance by parents of autistic pupils (Totsika et al., 2020).

Autistic children experience a number of additional stressors and challenges within the school environment which may further increase their feelings of anxiety. These include difficulties identifying emotions, social interaction challenges, sensory processing differences (e.g., sensitivities to loud corridors, different smells, busy classrooms), and difficulties tolerating unpredictability (Higgins, 2022).

“The full school day and daily lives of a SEN child and the extra stresses they experience and with hormones, sensory needs, feeling different...needs to be thought of.”

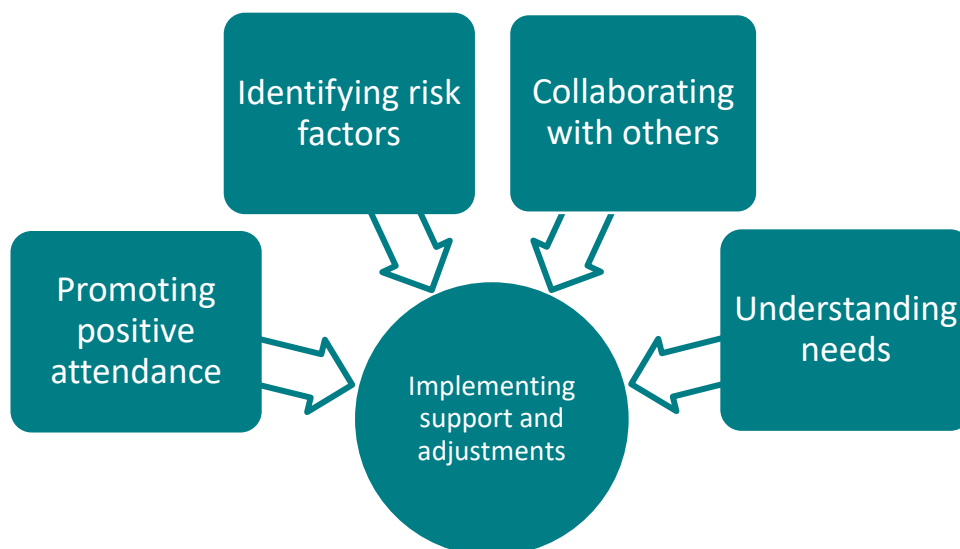
PACA MK EBSA listening event, March 2024.

Consequently, support might focus on aspects of the social and sensory environment as well as enhancing predictability through opportunities for autonomy, familiar routines, and carefully managing change and transitions. Dr Higgins has written a helpful blog post with suggestions of [what schools can do](#) to support autistic CYP with EBSA needs (Higgins, 2022), also see Appendix 1 for an infographic.

## 5. Implementing support and adjustments



Once rich and detailed information has been gathered from multiple perspectives, it is important to bring it all together (Figure 7) to ‘make sense’ of it. A shared understanding about the child, family and school-based factors underpinning the EBSA behaviours should then inform a personalised and multi-systemic support and intervention plan (Nuttall & Woods, 2013).



**Fig 7. Bringing it all together.**

A detailed analysis of the CYP’s individual barriers to attendance is a necessary precursor to the development of personalised support and intervention plans. Support plans should be written in collaboration with the CYP, parent/carer and other professionals involved. All parties need to sign up to what is agreed. In addition, support plans should:

- Be person-centred.
- Plan for a gradual and graded re-integration – a part time timetable may be appropriate in the short term.
- Link clearly to the factors identified as contributing to EBSA, and plan to intervene at both the school and home levels.
- Detail the strategies and approaches that will support the CYP achieve the outcomes set.
- Be realistic - an overly ambitious plan is likely to fail.
- Break down larger goals into small, achievable steps.
- Be clear about roles and responsibilities.
- Include review dates.

It is essential that plans are reviewed frequently (i.e., through brief check-ins, every 1 to 2 weeks), ensuring that all stakeholders are involved in the review process. Reviews should consider what has worked well, what should be continued, and what needs to be adjusted.

As new information gathered as part of the reviews, this should be fed into the ongoing shared understanding of the EBSA needs, with modifications made to the plan as required.

An editable EBSA support plan template can be found [here](#).

In addition to this, the following important considerations should be taken into account when planning and reviewing support:

- Prepare to take a flexible and individual approach.
- Recognise that what has worked for one pupil will not necessarily work for another.
- Anticipate that there may be 'bumps' in implementing the plan and include a commitment to finding solutions when that happens.
- Recognise that the CYP is likely to be more unsettled at the beginning of the plan, and that school and family need to work together to show a consistent approach.
- Keep optimistic; if a CYP does not attend on a day as planned, start again the next day.
- Any concerns about the process should not be shared in front of the CYP, a 'united front' is recommended.
- All school staff that the CYP will come into contact with should be aware of the plan.
- Be consistent and follow through on agreements till the end. For example, don't be tempted to move the goalposts if the child/young person is doing better than expected. This can reduce trust. Wait until the next review point to make changes.

### **Reasonable adjustments:**

Research highlights that an individualised and flexible approach is required in order to meet EBSA related needs (O'Hagan, Bond & Hebron, 2021). A range of adapted approaches incorporated into the school day (and detailed within an EBSA support plan) can help the child to feel less anxious and therefore more able to attend. These might include:

Increasing sense of safety:

- Transition support (to and from school, between lessons), adapted arrival routines, safe spaces, time out pass, access to preferred regulation activities, reduction of additional sensory stressors (e.g., lighting, noise, clothing), low pressure language.

Enhancing predictability:

- Clear and consistent routines, daily/weekly timetable provided in advance (perhaps visual), review of the schedule each morning on arrival, notice of upcoming changes of adult support or routines, more opportunities to make choices and decisions (e.g., nature of learning tasks, order of activities, where to sit in the classroom).

Fostering trusted adult relationships:

- Allocated key adult(s) or mentor, home/school communication book, meet and greet arrangements, check-ins, 'helper' roles and areas of responsibilities, pre-agreed 'welcome' scripts, or routines, attachment (transition) objects.

Promoting connection with peers and a sense of belonging:

- Break and lunch club, structured group games and activities, extra-curricular clubs linked to hobbies, working with a close friend or small group, buddy system.

## Guiding principles overview

### 1. Promoting positive attendance for all

- Attendance needs to be considered holistically with school environments that help CYP to feel safe, a sense of belonging and ready to learn.
- Schools should consider attendance alongside ways to promote whole school wellbeing.

### 2. Identifying needs in a timely way

- Attendance difficulties need to be identified early to prevent avoidance becoming entrenched.
- Early indicators of EBSA should be noticed and acted upon in a timely manner.

### 3. Collaborating through person-centred approaches

- There are usually complex and multi-faceted reasons for EBSA, at the child, home and school levels.
- It is essential that time is taken to understand the range of factors from different perspectives, gaining the voice of the CYP and their parents/carers.

### 4. Understanding individual needs and contexts

- Schools need to carefully explore the individual barriers to attendance, the possible functions of the avoidance, the push/pull factors, and the risk and resilience factors.
- It is important to consider whether there are any unmet special educational needs that might be making it more challenging for the pupil to attend school, such as difficulties associated with autism.

### 5. Implementing support and adjustments







- Once all information has been gathered, an EBSA support plan will usually be required.
- It is important for schools to work together with CYP and their parents/carers to ensure the plan and the adjustments made are personalised and bespoke.
- Plans need to be regularly reviewed to explore what is working well and what else needs to be done to support the CYP.

Fig 8. Guiding principles overview



# Fostering emotional wellbeing

When school avoidance happens more frequently, unhelpful routines and habits can develop. This can have a further detrimental impact on a child's emotional wellbeing and make it more difficult for them to attend school. Finding ways to promote emotional health and wellbeing, both in and out of school, might therefore be an important element of the support plan.

<p><b>Sleep hygiene</b></p>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Keep bedtime and waking times consistent.</li> <li>✓ Incorporate relaxing activities into bedtime such as a bath, reading, or colouring.</li> <li>✓ Avoid screen time late at night and first thing in the morning.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Diet and exercise</b></p>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Build in fun sporting activities.</li> <li>✓ Keep up with clubs and hobbies.</li> <li>✓ Eat a balanced diet at regular mealtimes.</li> <li>✓ Have a healthy and filling breakfast.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Relaxation</b></p>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Practice calming activities such as 7:11 breathing.</li> <li>✓ Use all of your senses to notice the world around you.</li> <li>✓ Visualise (imagine) a calming and peaceful place.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Routines and schedules</b></p>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Keep to familiar daily routines.</li> <li>✓ Use calendars and task lists (make it visual).</li> <li>✓ Build in activities that give you enjoyment and a sense of achievement.</li> <li>✓ Make a list of small goals or tasks and tick them off.</li> </ul>	<p><b>GREAT DREAM</b></p>  <p>10 Keys to Happier Living (visit <a href="#">Action for Happiness</a> for more ideas)</p>	<p><b>Nature</b></p>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Take a walk in the woods, pay attention to what's around you.</li> <li>✓ Go on a bug hunt, make a bird watching diary, collect leaves or press flowers.</li> <li>✓ Visit a farm or stroke an animal.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Enjoyable activities</b></p>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ During after school hours, plan fun things to do.</li> <li>✓ Find ways to have fun and laugh that work for you.</li> <li>✓ Build in activities each day that you enjoy.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Connecting with others</b></p>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Spend time with your friends, in person or online.</li> <li>✓ Do fun activities together, like games and team sports.</li> <li>✓ Work together on a joint project or task.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Jobs and tasks</b></p>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Keep your spaces tidy.</li> <li>✓ Find ways to help others with their tasks.</li> <li>✓ Take a role of responsibility around the home or at school.</li> <li>✓ Notice how it feels to be helpful.</li> </ul>

# Good practice examples

In June 2024, representatives from eight Milton Keynes schools took part in a focus group to discuss good practice examples for supporting children and young people experiencing EBSA at the universal and targeted/personalised levels. Their suggestions were grouped by recurrent themes and are presented in Figures 9a and 9b below.



Fig 9a. Universal level support.

## Targeted/ Personalised Level

### External support

"Used some alternative providers as part of plans to build social confidence"

"Referral to Family Liaison Officer to work with students and parents"

"Zones of regulation and CBT through MHST. Also our wellbeing team offer talking therapy"

### Promoting attendance

"EBSA provision rewards programmes, trips, mentoring"

"Reward for lesson success, trips to work towards, provide life skill based learning"

### Enhanced communication

"Informal meetings to create a concrete plan to move forward"

"Ad-hoc meetings will be scheduled depending on need"

"Daily email or phone contact with parents"

### Bespoke adjustments

"Lots of safe places with known staff available"

"Bespoke part of timetable to focus on an interest"

"School timings adapted" "Built an EBSA provision"

"Small group learning where possible"

"Time out concession if the student gets overwhelmed"

"Nurture room for children at lunchtime and playtime"

"Offer a summer school where the child gets to know staff on a personal basis without it being in a classroom"

"Reflection of the day book – what's gone well? Any problems?"

### Deeper understanding

"The cards to help identify barriers is useful for Pastoral Mentors to use"

"EBSA cards when returning to lessons to remind teachers of student barriers and support, equally have developed pupil passports"

Fig 9b. Targeted/personalised level support.

### Pause for reflection...

What strategies have been successful in supporting CYP with EBSA needs to feel more able to attend school?

What helps to promote a CYP's sense of belonging and psychological safety within the school environment?

If we were to ask CYP with EBSA what support strategies they find most helpful, what might they say?

# Further support and signposting

## Local services (education, health, and social care)

**Milton Keynes SEND Specialist Teaching Teams:** EBSA-related support includes initial support or advice via the SEND Support Line. Ordinarily, it is expected that schools fully utilise the EBSA guidance before requesting direct involvement. In the majority of cases, it is expected that by using the EBSA guidance, further support from the Specialist Teaching Team will not be necessary. Direct involvement can include advice for developing and implementing a plan using the EBSA guidance, modelled strategies, recommendations for the involvement of additional services as appropriate and specific work depending on the need. Referrals from schools/settings for direct involvement are received via the SEND Support Line ([SENDSupport@milton-keynes.gov.uk](mailto:SENDSupport@milton-keynes.gov.uk)). For further information about our SEND support offer, please see: [Inclusion Specialist Teaching Team](#) and [EHC Specialist Teaching Team](#).

**Educational Psychology Service (EPS):** Schools and settings can request support in helping CYP experiencing EBSA. This includes booking an EBSA-focused psychological consultation to explore the issue or concern, with the aim of finding some useful ways forward. Schools can contact the SEND Support Line: [SENDSupport@milton-keynes.gov.uk](mailto:SENDSupport@milton-keynes.gov.uk) to make a booking. For more detailed information about the EPS, please see: [Educational Psychology Service](#).

**Milton Keynes School Nursing Service:** is a team of qualified school nurses, registered nurses, and health care assistants specifically trained and skilled to deliver holistic and specialist care to CYP. They offer advice on a broad range of general health interventions and signpost or refer to other services. In relation to EBSA, low level anxiety support can be offered. Initial assessment and follow up is offered as determined by a nurse and based on the level of need. ChatHealth (text messaging service for CYP between the ages of 11-19 years - 07480 635517) is used. Any professional, parent or CYP can refer to the service, using the School Nurse referral form. The School Nursing Team can be contacted via the Single Point of Access: 01908 725100 or [cnw-tr.0-19adminhub.mk@nhs.net](mailto:cnw-tr.0-19adminhub.mk@nhs.net). Please also see their website for more information: [MK Children's Health](#).

**Mental Health Support Teams (MHST):** MHST currently work with specific schools to support CYP (aged 5 to 18 years) and their families, with mild to moderate mental health difficulties (e.g., anxiety, depression, low mood, self-harm) through time-limited evidence-based interventions. Schools that have access to a MHST can request advice about EBSA from their link practitioner. Contact can be via email (General enquires: [cnwl.mhst@nhs.net](mailto:cnwl.mhst@nhs.net)) or telephone (01908 724691). Referral by school, initially in consultation with the team, followed with a completed referral and CYP and parental consent where required. Please see [MK Mental Health Support Teams](#) for more information.

**Service Six:** Provides low level support for CYP aged 5 to 18. They work on issues including anxiety, self-harm, self-esteem, bullying and more. This is a referral-based service, and referrals can be made by the young person, parent, school, or social worker. To contact or refer to this service, call 01933 277520 or email [referrals@servicesix.co.uk](mailto:referrals@servicesix.co.uk).

**Milton Keynes Specialist Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS):** CAMHS provide a specialist service to CYP up to the age of 18 years old. They support moderate to severe mental health needs. CAMHS provide a full mental health assessment for CYP where mental health is a dominant factor in EBSA, and they meet the threshold of a moderate to severe mental health difficulty. Following assessment, a formulation of next steps will be made. Professionals or CYP can refer via the SPA (Single Point of Access) Team on 01908 724228 or by completing the referral form. Please see: [MK CAMHS](#).

**Targeted Early Help team:** work with families identified as needing intensive targeted support which cannot be met by universal and specialist services alone. They work with families with children aged 0-18 years of age. All referrals need to be made via MASH (Milton Keynes Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub) who assess the level of need to establish whether the referred concerns meet the criteria for intervention from children's services, or whether further support and guidance can be provided by universal provision. Referrals must be accompanied with a completed Early Help Assessment and information about the services and support which has already been put into place. For more information please visit: [Early help](#) and [Early Help Advisors and Assessment](#)

## **Other mental health and wellbeing support within Milton Keynes**

**Zone INN:** a wellbeing service for children aged 8 – 18 years living in Milton Keynes offered by Relate MK. Please visit [Relate MK Children's Wellbeing Service](#) for more information.

**Mind BLMK Young Person's Sanctuary Milton Keynes:** offers 'drop-in' mental health support for young people aged 14 - 17 years. Please visit [Young Person's Sanctuary MK](#) for more information.

**Milton Keynes City Council:** [Mental Health and Wellbeing Hub](#)

**Milton Keynes Health Watch:** [Children's mental health support](#)

### **Other useful websites:**

- Visit [Young Minds](#), in particular their section on [School Anxiety and Refusal](#).
- Visit [Anna Freud](#) for information and resources about emotional health and wellbeing. The section about [school attendance and mental wellbeing](#) is particularly useful.
- Visit [Coping Skills for Kids](#) for a wealth of information and activities to develop pupils' emotional regulation skills.
- Visit [MHFA England](#) especially their section on [Resources for schools](#).
- Visit [Action for Happiness](#) for a range of activities for promoting wellbeing within your school community ([children and young people](#)).



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# Appendices

## Appendix 1: EBSA and Autism, what can schools do?

### EBSA AND AUTISM

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#### AUTONOMY AND STUDENT VOICE

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

#### THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

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



#### ADJUSTMENTS TO MEET INDIVIDUAL NEEDS

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

#### STRONG RELATIONSHIPS

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

#### WHAT CAN SCHOOLS DO?



Higgins (2022)



**Milton Keynes**  
City Council