



Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) and Autism

Information for parents and carers
West Sussex Educational Psychology Service



What is EBSA?

Worrying or anxiety is a normal feeling that we all experience from time to time. It can even keep us safe from harm or help us perform in difficult situations. However, sometimes anxiety or excessive worrying can become a problem especially when it stops people doing what they want or need to do.

Many children and young people worry about school. This is normal. Anxieties are part of life and learning to deal with them is part of growing up. However sometimes a child's worries may lead to difficulties attending school. If your child has high levels of anxiety and does not want to attend school, they may be experiencing Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA).

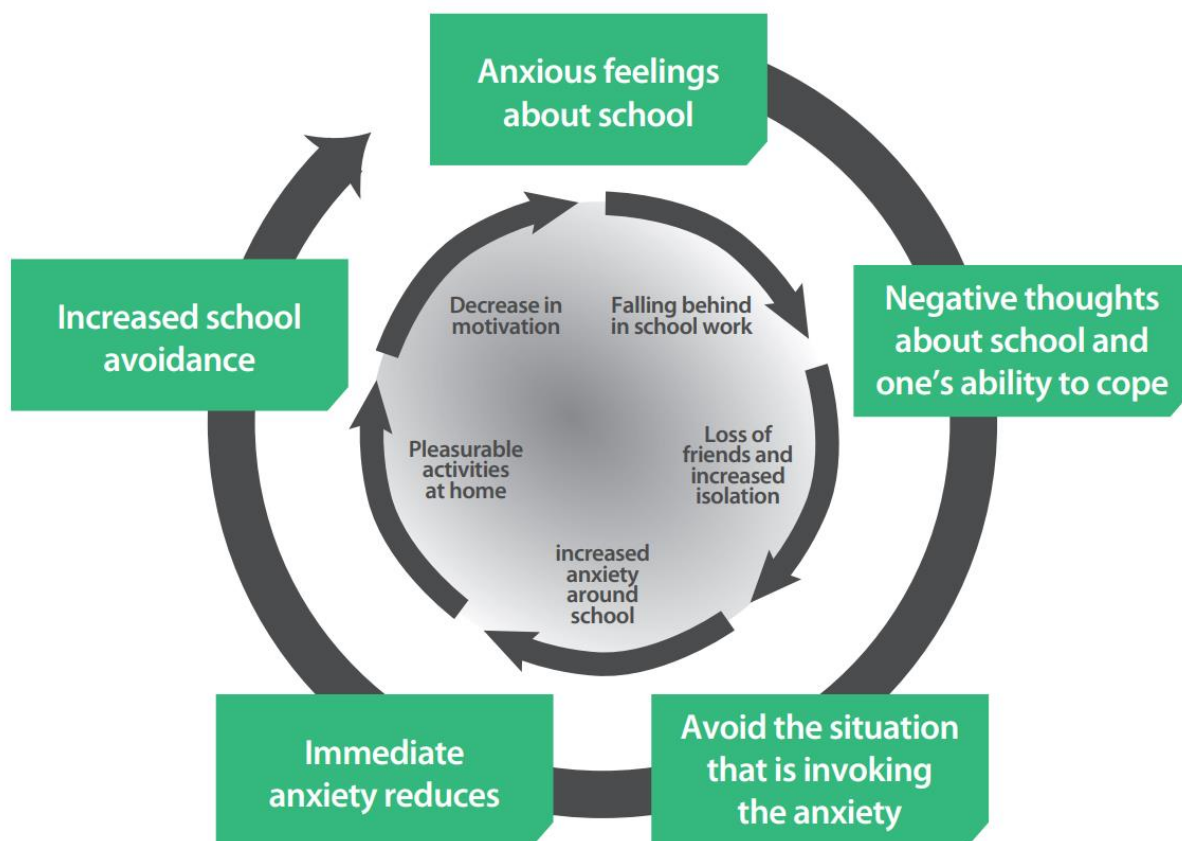


Signs of EBSA

These could include:

- Fearfulness, anxiety, tantrums or expression of negative feelings, when faced with the prospect of attending school.
- They may complain that they have abdominal pain, headache, sore throat, often with no signs of actual physical illness.
- Complain of anxiety symptoms that include a racing heart, shaking, sweating, difficulty breathing, butterflies in the tummy or nausea, pins and needles.

The symptoms are typically worse on weekday mornings and absent at weekends and school holidays.



The longer the problems remain unaddressed the poorer the outcome, as the difficulties and behaviours become entrenched.

Autism and EBSA

Children and young people with autism often face additional challenges in school which may make them anxious about school and appear to experience EBSA. However, it is important to appreciate that anxiety is not simply a part of autism and can be supported in its own right.

Research has helped identify key factors impacting on the anxiety of autistic children and young people. Frequent sensory processing differences can make the world unpredictable. School life is full of sensory experiences ranging from busy corridors to colourful display boards to school uniforms in materials that children might find difficult to tolerate. Difficulties in understanding their emotions also makes the world feel more uncertain and unpredictable as well as making it difficult to regulate emotions. This uncertainty and unpredictability can be difficult to tolerate and it is this intolerance of uncertainty which causes anxiety.

So, when autistic children and young people show signs of EBSA it is useful to unpick what they are finding difficult to tolerate. Schools can help with this and seek further advice from supporting West Sussex County Council teams.

Any child/ young person currently avoiding school is likely to become anxious when asked to talk about their difficulties or returning to school. For an autistic young person, they may have additional layers of anxiety as they face sensory and social challenges and/or may have difficulty in being able to identify how they are feeling. Parents and carers know children best and may already have helped them to find ways of managing situations and events outside school. This experience will be helpful for your child's school when working with you to put the right support in place.



What should you do?

One of the most important ways you can support your child is to calmly listen to them and acknowledge that their fears are real to them. Remind them how important it is to attend school and reassure them that you and the school will work with them to make school a happier place for them.

Tell the school there is a problem as soon as possible and work in partnership with the school to address the issue. A plan should be made with the school to help your child. Towards the beginning of initiating the plan your child may show more distress and you should prepare yourself for this.

Make contact with the school Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) or Inclusion Manager to share your child's difficulties and work together to support their return to education.

Try to plan ahead with your child and their school for any uncertainties they might find difficult to tolerate.

It is really important that all adults both at home and school, work together to agree a firm and consistent approach. Any concerns about the plan should not be shared with your child and a positive 'united front' is recommended.

It is likely that there may be difficulties implementing the plan and these should be anticipated and solutions found. You should try to keep an optimistic approach, if your child fails to attend school on one day, start again the next day. It is also important to remember there is likely to be more difficulty after a school holiday, period of illness or after the weekend.

You may feel tempted to change schools, however research tells us that often difficulties will re-emerge in the new school and it is normally better to try to resolve the issue in the current school.

Finally, as a parent it can be really difficult to see your child unhappy or distressed. Make sure that you have someone with whom you can share your worries.

What school can do to support

- Listen carefully to you and your child. They should acknowledge the challenges faced by your child and you as their parent.
- Maintain close contact with you and your child, even during extended periods of non-attendance. An agreed member of staff should be named as a link person.
- Work in partnership with you and your child to find out what difficulties your child is experiencing and find ways of making school a happier place and improve their confidence and attendance.
- Hold meetings to devise a targeted support plan in conjunction with you and your child. The plan should include what the supported next steps should be.
- Respond to any school-based needs, such as academic support, sensory sensitivities, dealing with bullying or support with social relationships.
- Have a whole school awareness and understanding of curriculum, teaching and learning strategies that can support children with ASC/ sensory sensitivities. (e.g. Quality First Teaching).
- Consider the support your child might require upon arrival at school. This might include meeting with a friend at a specific place and time, using a quiet space to settle before school starts, engaging in a preferred activity or being given a responsibility such as a monitor role, in order to build confidence and engagement.
- Following the implementation and review of a targeted school support plan, if difficulties and concerns continue, staff understand the process for gaining further advice and involve relevant agencies and professionals at the earliest opportunity.
- If a secondary school aged child or young person has an identified SEN, there should be consideration of SENCo/Inclusion Manager involvement in addition to support from the pastoral care team.

The school can refer to:

[West Sussex EBSA Guidance document](#)

[West Sussex Guide to Ordinarily Available Inclusive Practice- see Tools for Schools](#)

Talking to your child about their worries

Any child currently avoiding school is likely to become anxious when they are asked to talk about their difficulties or returning to school. A good place to start is to acknowledge that it may be difficult but that you would like to know what they think and feel. If they find it difficult to talk, you could ask them a specific question this might help them start to sort through their fears and feelings.

For example: What three things are you most worried about? Or What three things were you recently worried about?

It is also important to focus on positives: What are the three best things about school?

Sometimes children may find it hard to tell you face to face, perhaps you could ask them to write it down, email or text you. Some children also find it easier to draw how they are feeling.

Consider identifying an individual sensory profile for your child. Then provide resources or suggest activities that meet the needs identified and might help in a sensory demanding environment like school (e.g. ear defenders, movement breaks, fiddle toys).

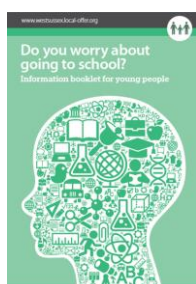
Think about how you can help your child develop an understanding of their emotions which might include labelling and modelling your own emotions as well as using resources developed specifically for autistic children or anxious children.

Consider using prompts to help your child identify what specific aspects of school life they find difficult to tolerate. Further information and resources can be found here:

[Autism and Social Communication Advisory Team Wiki](#)

[Leaflets for children and young people on EBSA](#)

[An Evidence Based Guide to anxiety in Autism](#)



Further sources of support

SENDIAS

The West Sussex SEND Information, Advice and Support Service provides impartial information, advice and support to parents and carers of children who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, as well as the children and young people themselves. They offer a Helpline from 9am to 4pm: 0330 222 8555 (answerphone in operation outside of these times)

Youngminds

A charity championing the wellbeing and mental health of young people. They publish a range of information for parents. They also have a parent helpline. Calls are free Mon-Fri from 9:30am to 4pm 0808 802 5544

ASPENS

A charity providing care and support to help people living with disabilities, complex needs and autism through 1-1 support, group support and workshops. (Some specific input is chargeable). Self-referral (for families and carers):

Tel no: 01243 214120 / Email: familysupport@aspens.org.uk

National Autistic Society (NAS)

Autism Helpline:

Call 0808 800 4104, 10.00 a.m. to 3.00 p.m. Monday to Friday (excluding bank holidays).

This leaflet was written by The West Sussex Educational Psychology Service, Autism and Social Communication Team and SENDIAS

