

# Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA)

Guidance for: Parent carers,  
Children and young people



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# Introduction: The Development of EBSA Responses in East Sussex

The term *Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA)* refers to the severe difficulty in attending school experienced by some children and young people, due to emotional factors. The impact of EBSA on young people is far reaching. Outcomes for young people who display EBSA include poor academic attainment, reduced social opportunities and limited employment opportunities (Garry 1996, Pellegrini 2007, and Taylor 2012). EBSA is also associated with poor adult mental health, difficulties can often quickly spiral requiring inpatient treatment (Blagg 1987 and Walter et al 2010).

ISEND staff worked with the East Sussex Parent Carer Forum to gather the views of parent carers to inform the production of the Schools' EBSA guidance, as well as co-producing this information booklet for parents/carers, which includes EBSA information for children and young people.

## EBSA Information for Parent carers by parent carers

### What is EBSA?

Emotionally Based School Avoidance is a term used to describe some children and young people who do not attend school due to emotional factors. Other terms are: Emotionally Based School Refusal (EBSR) or Anxiety Related Non-Attendance (ARNA). In East Sussex we choose to use the generic term Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) to include children who are unable to attend rather than choosing not to attend, based on a heightened level of fear and anxiety that makes school feel unsafe and something to be avoided.

The coronavirus pandemic has led to heightened anxiety in all parts of society. Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) was a growing issue prior to the Coronavirus pandemic, and Covid-19 has exacerbated the situation. If you are experiencing this in your family, please know that you are not alone, and that support is available as outlined in this guidance. EBSA is complex and the issues are specific to each individual so there is no one way to resolve the situation, however this guidance offers information, advice, and a range of strategies from East Sussex families' lived experiences. Shame and judgment often accompany EBSA and prevent people from seeking help. Spotting the signs of EBSA and taking steps quickly can enable a child to remain in education and achieve to their potential - help is available so please read on.

### How this guidance was produced

ESCC ISEND is grateful to the East Sussex children and families who have given their time and shared their experiences of EBSA to create this parents/carers guidance. In compiling these resources, we have consulted with members of the East Sussex Parent and Carer Forum (ESPCF) in a range of ways:

- An initial focus group attended by parents/carers of children who had emotional difficulties relating to school avoidance. Several had ongoing problems which had not resolved over several years, meaning that they were either out of school or on extended part time timetables. Some had felt the only option was to home educate.
- A survey -285 parents and carers completed this to highlight the prevalence of EBSA in East Sussex. Key headlines:
  - 45% have experience of EBSA
  - 61% would contact their child's class teacher first
  - 33% were signposted by school to Health services
  - 30% received no support as their child seemed fine in school
  - 30% said attention was focused on attendance rather than underlying issues
  - 85% think school staff need to spend more time listening to children's concerns
  - 84% would find it useful to have a named member of staff as their key contact

- Regular meetings with ESPCF members and ISEND colleagues to review existing guidance and produce an East Sussex version incorporating local feedback

Through discussions, the following issues emerged as important:



- Listening to parents/carers
- Early identification of needs and a positive, non-judgemental approach to difficulties
- Peer support and/or independent advocacy
- A clear, speedy, and complete assessment pathway
- Information and signposting - when and how you need it
- Provision being available to meet assessed needs
- Training and support for schools and services, including parents/carers as trainers

Parents’ and carers’ journeys have all too often been long and painful, with negative long-term consequences for children’s educational attainment and the emotional wellbeing of the whole family. This guidance, along with associated resources, is intended to support parents/carers to identify the signs of EBSA, and to develop collaborative relationships with school staff to support children’s needs and enable them to engage in education.

Parents/carers know their children best and can provide schools with an accurate summary of behaviours at home. Many children with extreme anxiety mask it all day at school, so it can be hard for school staff to accept that the quiet child getting on with their work in their class can be experiencing such emotional distress that they may be shouting, crying, hitting family members, throwing objects, and exhibiting other extreme behaviours in the home. Children are usually able to release their feelings in the safe and supportive environment of home, where they feel unsafe to express in school.

# Spotting the signs of Emotionally Based School Avoidance in your child

Children and young people can display a range of behaviours, not all of which are on their own indicative of EBSA. Parents of children and young people with EBSA have reported the following behaviours which are typically worse on weekday mornings and absent at weekends and school holidays.

Possible signs of EBSA:



- Frequently feeling unwell
- Frequent minor absences
- Sleep difficulties
- Lack of appetite
- Changes in personality
- Separation anxiety
- Tearfulness and general irritability
- Emotional volatility
- Friendship issues

## 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.

# Listening to and talking with your child

## Consider when and where you will talk

Agree an appropriate time and place with your child, e.g., this could be in the time after school and before dinner if your child is attending school. For children who are not attending, agree with them the most conducive time - most likely in the middle part of the day when they are up, have eaten something, and are into the day. Try to avoid first thing in the morning before they are fully 'present', or just before bed as this can disrupt sleep.

Agree with your child **their** 'best times' for talking, and keep it focused and time-limited to avoid it becoming onerous for you or your child.

Ensure that this is a time when you can give your child your full attention, away from other family members and distractions such as the TV or other devices.

## Focus on listening

If your child has opened up to you, it's because they trust you and feel a need to share their difficulties. Let them talk. Ask open questions that encourage a fuller response than 'yes' or 'no'. Questions starting with 'what, when, who, how' etc...

## Let them know if you don't understand or need clarity

Answers can get muddled as children try to explain feelings they may not understand, asking clarifying questions shows you are listening and trying to understand

## Empathise and acknowledge how hard it is

It is important to let your child know that overcoming anxiety is hard, and that you are proud of their efforts. Verbally validate your child's emotions and show that you understand their experience and are listening to what they have to say, but don't validate their fears. The message you want to send is, "I know you're scared, and that's okay, and I'm here, and I'm going to help you get through this."

## Make yourself available to talk again if needed

It can be a relief to talk, but ongoing anxiety isn't solved with just one conversation. Let them know when they speak to you again.

## Offer support

Explain that you will look at how you can help them. Never leave this kind of conversation without agreeing next steps, this will help the child to realise that you're working with them to move things forward.

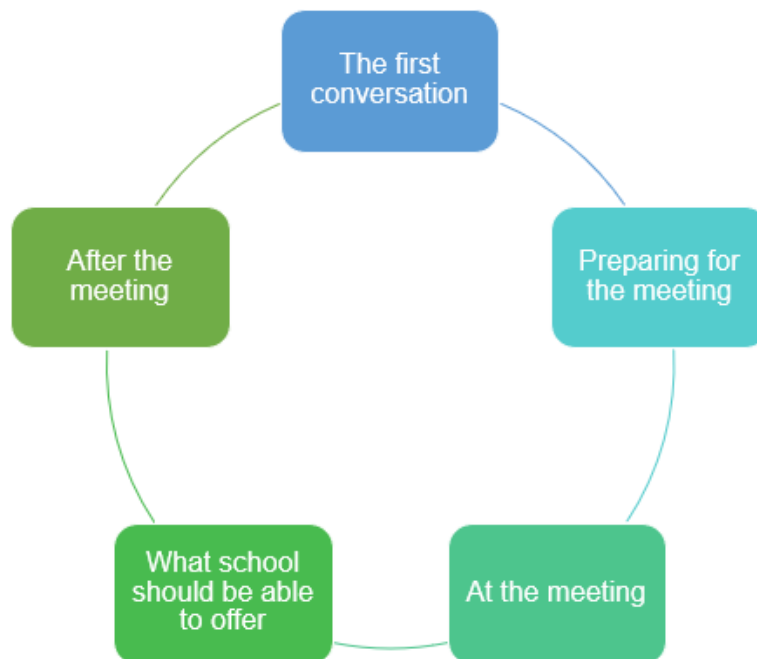
Websites with useful suggestions to help you talk to your child:

[https://youngminds.org.uk/media/1712/young-minds-conversation-starters\\_final-003.pdf](https://youngminds.org.uk/media/1712/young-minds-conversation-starters_final-003.pdf)

[helping-your-child-with-anxiety.pdf \(youngminds.org.uk\)](https://youngminds.org.uk/media/1712/helping-your-child-with-anxiety.pdf)

# Working with the school

It is crucial that all adults, at home and in school, work together to understand the reasons for school avoidance and find solutions together. As soon as signs are spotted parents should tell the school there is a problem and request a meeting.



## 1. The first conversation

- Contact school as soon as you notice your child is regularly missing school or you are noticing any of the warning signs mentioned earlier
- Ask who you need to speak to - it may be your child's teacher/tutor or the SENCO
- Ask if they have concerns or have noticed that your child is having difficulties
- Request a face to face meeting which will allow plenty of time to discuss fully all your concerns. The meeting could be with a class teacher, SENCO, and a member of the senior leadership team (SLT), if appropriate. If there is a member of staff your child has a good relationship with or trusts, ask that they also attend the meeting
- Consider asking for a meeting between you, the school, *and* your child. It might build trust and help your child feel supported, listened to and believed



Ask for clarification on who will be involved in supporting your child and how decisions around EBSA are made within the school. For example, ask how the SENCO is supported - are they part of the Senior Leadership Team?

## 2. Preparing for the meeting

Make sure your child is aware of the meeting and is informed of discussions and outcomes. Anxieties might be further exacerbated if not

- Prepare some ideas:
  - What triggers can you identify and share with the school?

- Is there a signal or indicator your child can show the member of staff when they are not ok, e.g. a time out card so your child can leave a lesson without being questioned, changing a wristband from green to red, pen in a certain position on desk?
- Is there a particular seat or space in the classroom where your child feels less anxious and more comfortable?
- Think about noise levels, light, windows with movement and noise outside, movement of children and staff between desks, proximity of those around them and access to the teaching assistant for support

Consider any medical appointments or reports which your child has had and which support your child's situation. Have copies to give to school

Write a short list of things you want to be sure to ask or say. Maybe take someone with you who can listen, make notes for you and remind you to cover all the points on your list - this could be a trusted friend or family member or a support worker who knows you and your child etc



**Read up on your rights:** know what you and your child are entitled to by law, e.g. reasonable adjustments.

There are websites offering helpful advice on SEN and disability law. Here are some examples: [SEN and disability statute law, regulations and guidance | \(IPSEA\) Independent Provider of Special Education Advice](#) | [SOS!SEN](#) | [The Independent Helpline for Special Education Needs \(sossen.org.uk\)](#) Or you can call the free, confidential SENDIASS advice line: [Amaze - SENDIASS advice line for families with disabled children in Sussex \(amazesussex.org.uk\)](#)

- Familiarise yourself with the school's policies on special educational needs (SEN), attendance, and behaviour so you'll know if they are applying these appropriately in practice to your child
- Find out who your school's SEN link governor is, if there is a mental health link governor, and how you can contact them - should you need to
- Join support groups: connect with other parent carers either online or at local meet-ups. Peer support and advice can be invaluable [[link to ESPCF page with list of groups and charities](#)]

### 3. At the meeting

- Agree a note taker at the meeting and that notes/actions will be circulated by email afterwards
- Try to agree shared goals at the start, e.g. I know we all want [child's name] to be less anxious and able to flourish in school, and outline what you hope to achieve. Focus your aims on your child's wellbeing and future
- Be assertive, polite and positive
- Aim to share ideas and find joint solutions that may make things work better for your child. Ask school what they think may help as well as telling them what you think



Make sure you know the name and role of everyone present. Throughout the meeting, feel able to ask for clarification on anything you don't understand or are unclear about.

- Explain the behaviours your child is demonstrating at home. Use specific examples and how often these occur. A diary can be a way to present this clearly.



- Tell school what it is like to have a child who suffers from EBSA: how it affects daily life, the emotional impact it has on your child, their siblings, you as the parent(s), the wider family. Describe a typical day
- Agree a safe space where your child can go when feeling overwhelmed, with clear parameters on how long for, whether a member of staff goes with them. In general, having a trusted adult with them will help to regulate their emotions and be ready to learn
- Agree a strategy for your child to let their teacher know they are struggling - think about the ideas you've prepared, e.g. time out card, red or green wristband



Take your own notes of any decisions/agreements made. Don't agree to anything yourself, or on behalf of your child, that you think is not achievable.

- Try to summarise at the end what has been agreed, including who is doing what and any timescales
- Be realistic. You may not get everything you hope from one meeting
- Agree the next meeting date

#### 4. What school should be able to offer

- To listen to what you and your child are saying and acknowledge these difficulties
- To hold further meetings with all stakeholders to develop a clear and detailed action plan with identified next steps
- A joined up strategy: Consideration of what provision will be made and how any support measures or agreed strategies will be shared with all staff involved with young person.
- To work in partnership, consulting with you, not just informing you, at every stage of the process
- To hold regular review meetings to review progress
- A nominated person who will be your point of contact for communication with the school. Be clear on how **you** would like the school to communicate with you and your child
- If difficulties persist the school should consider requesting involvement from other professionals
- The school should refer to the East Sussex EBSA Guidance Document

#### 5. After the meeting

- It is helpful to email your school contact confirming any decisions or actions which were agreed, including dates of future meetings and who is due to attend. You may not be able to do this immediately, but when you do it could help establish and maintain a positive relationship with your key contact. It could also be used at future meetings to check actions have been carried out.

#### Online support and advice groups

[Not Fine in School - School Refusal, School Attendance](#)

[School Refusal Support Services for Phobia, Refusal & Separation Anxiety© | Facebook](#)

## **Other ways to support your child to manage anxiety**

### **Don't avoid everything that causes anxiety**

Avoiding things that make your child upset is a natural parent response, but in the long run this only serves to reinforce their anxiety. By taking a child out of a situation that makes them anxious they are learning this as a coping mechanism, and this can become a repeating cycle. An alternative method is to try an exposure ladder. This is a process where the child breaks down their anxiety into manageable steps, and gradually increases these steps to overcome their anxiety. For example, if your child is anxious about dogs you could start with looking at pictures of dogs, move on to seeing them from a distance and eventually walking past one.

(See **Appendices 3** for [‘Facing Your Fears’](#) Ladder templates and examples and information about graded exposure)

### **Be realistic with your expectations**

Do not tell your child that their anxiety trigger will never happen, as this is unrealistic. Instead, work on giving them the confidence to manage their anxiety if the trigger does happen and be there to support them to do this. Talk about times in the past when your child has felt anxious and made it through. By supporting your child to learn to tolerate their anxiety, only then will it begin to decrease. For example, if your child is scared of the dentist, let them know that it may be uncomfortable for a little while but by going regularly they will have healthy teeth that won't hurt in the future. Support this by reminding them of the last time they went to the dentist and they made it through fine!

It's also possible that your child can't articulate or does not know what causes them to feel anxious. In this case, try not to keep asking, but let them know that it's ok not to know. You appreciate that they feel anxious nonetheless and will do what you can to help them manage their feelings.

### **Calm parent, calm child**

Children model their parent's behaviours, and so it is important to also consider how your own anxiety might be affecting your child. If you are anxious, your child will pick up on it and experience an increase in their own anxiety. So, when you want to reduce your child's anxiety, you must manage your own anxiety first. Parents can do this by modelling how they successfully manage anxiety; let your child know when you are using a coping skill (e.g., “I'm feeling a little bit nervous about that, I'm going to take a few deep breaths before I respond” or “I'm worried I won't know what to say, so I'm going to write down the main points to mention”). By modelling appropriate behaviour and positive thinking, when you look for the positive in situations, so will your child.

### **Try not to reinforce your child's fears**

The natural response to an anxious child can be to provide reassurance. Whilst this is appropriate, it is important to not excessively reassure your child. For example, if your child is worrying about not being safe at night, they may want lots of lights on or for there to be lots of locks on the doors. By acting in a way consistent with the fear (e.g., fitting extra locks), you may communicate to the child that the fear is real, and they are not safe.

Be aware that body language, tone of voice and behaviours can all reinforce anxiety. If your child is anxious about separation from you, they may become upset when going to school for example. Whilst it is appropriate to reassure the child, long emotional goodbyes may unintentionally communicate to the child that there is something to be worried about and this can reduce feelings of coping. Consider how your own behaviours and responses may be influencing your child's anxiety.

### **Reduce the amount of time the child has to anticipate the event**

Often the hardest part for children who are anxious is the run up to the anxiety-provoking event or act. Therefore, parents should attempt to eliminate or reduce this anticipatory period. For example, if your child is anxious about going to the doctors and you have to book an appointment in, try telling them just

a few hours before the appointment, to reduce the time for them to worry about it.

## **Discuss with your child their reluctance and anxiety about going to school**

Try to explore their concerns (often easier said than done) and try to establish if there are specific worries about specific aspects of school. If successful in picking apart the reasons for avoidance, work with the child and the school to find ways of minimising the worries so that the anxiety can be better managed. Avoiding school and avoiding the triggers for the worries or anxieties will not make them go away, it is more likely to reinforce them.

## **Support your child in facing and confronting the fears (where possible)**

It is through this that they will learn the coping skills that they will need throughout life. Ensure that you are consistent in encouraging your child to go to (and remain at) school. Avoiding worries and fears is less painful (in the short term) for the child than confronting them. Some children learn how to 'stay off' school and they can soon learn the 'buttons' to press with parents that will allow them to stay away from school (and avoid their anxieties). This can lead to the habit of avoidance that can be a very tricky habit to break later. Confront rather than avoid.

## **Be consistent and remain steadfast**

Allowing the child to avoid school 'just this once' or because it is easier than a battle could be the beginning of a slippery slope. What may seem like the easy way out for you now could prove damaging later when the habit of avoidance settles in.

## **Encourage your child to become a thought detective**

You can do this by teaching them the 3Cs method below:

- **Catch your thoughts.**

Imagine every thought you have floats above your head in a bubble. Try and catch one of the worried thoughts and write it down

- **Collect evidence.**

Next, collect evidence to support or negate this thought. (*Supporting evidence: "I had a hard time finding someone to sit with at lunch yesterday."* *Negating evidence: "Sophie and I do homework together and she's a friend of mine."*)

- **Challenge your thoughts.**

Think about the evidence you have collected and decide whether, based on the facts, the worry is true (*e.g., "No, it's not true, Sophie is my friend at school"*).



## Encourage your child to keep in touch with school friends outside of school clubs

This will strengthen friendship bonds and could improve their support network within school. This can help them in dealing with their worries.

## Activity and exercise is also a great way for children to help to manage stress and anxiety

It is a distraction and physical exercise itself is effective in supporting emotional wellbeing. Ensure that your child has good eating and sleeping routines too.

### Preparation

Help your child to prepare for school the night before so that there is no added rush (or opportunities for excuses and delays) in the morning.

### Routines

Establish and maintain good routines (eating, sleep, and exercise). Sleep patterns are particularly important, sleeping and catching up on sleep during the day must be vigilantly managed. Poor sleep patterns feed anxiety and sleeping during the day will make it harder to break a cycle of avoidance.

### Understanding

Help the child to understand that worry, fear, and anxiety are all normal emotions and that they can learn to manage and cope with these normal responses to difficult or scary situations. Every time a fear is confronted is a success, and the more successes the child accrues in dealing with their worries, the greater their confidence and eventually their resilience will be. Make sure you recognise and celebrate their achievements in facing their fears. Reinforce these achievements and encourage them to build on

these wins. This confidence in their ability to face their worries will help them to develop the awareness that they can overcome and manage their fears and worries. This is much healthier and effective than allowing your child to avoid their worries and school. Remind them of the importance of facing their fears and the importance of a good education for their future choices.

## Purpose and direction

Focus on something positive that they want from life. Try to link this with education. Make the 'battle' purposeful. We are all motivated more by working towards something we want or away from something we really do not want. Reinforce the reasons why this 'blip' needs to be managed and overcome.

## Looking after your own wellbeing

*“Being the parent/carer of a child with additional needs is unlike anything else. Imagine falling off an ocean liner into choppy waters. You cling on to a piece of driftwood until that gets worn thin by the waves, then if you’re lucky, you find a plastic drum which you can use as a raft for a while. And you hang on to whatever flotsam and jetsam you can grasp whilst being tossed around, in the hope of being rescued by a life-boat”.*

## Self-care - put your own oxygen mask on first!

Children’s wellbeing is directly related to parental wellbeing. Self-care is not selfish, it’s vital if we want to be the kind of parent that we aspire to be and remain well and emotionally available to our children.

The following basic principles are important to maintain your wellbeing as a parent/carer:

- **Connect:** Keep in touch with family/friends, play games together, listen to music that reminds you of special times, share old photos/memories.
- **Be Active:** Walk, dance, jog, create football challenges, play hide and seek, complete jobs around the house, circuit training.
- **Take Notice:** Spend time outside every day, observe nature, try yoga, be creative, look up at the night sky.
- **Keep Learning:** Watch a new film, read a book, learn a new fact, cook or bake, share a skill, try something different.
- **Give:** Time to relax, help someone with a job, call someone to check they are doing ok, give someone a hug.

## Look after your own self-esteem

EBSA is isolating for your child, but also for you - ‘find your tribe’ and ensure you have ways of connecting with people who understand the challenges you and your family are facing. This could be other parents/carers, specific school staff, local/national services and organisations, helplines, etc. See **Appendix 1 for Online support and advice** and reach out for help. When asked ‘how are you?’, don’t mask it by saying ‘fine’ - it’s ok to ask for help, and this shows your child that it’s ok for them to ask for help too.

You are likely to feel guilt and shame, like you are failing at being a parent - don’t believe the hype! You are the most important person in your child’s life and need to look after yourself to be your best self.

Think small - celebrate small breakthroughs, which could result in half an hour of ‘me time’ - sit and have a cuppa, read the paper, do a crossword, go for a walk, call a friend, try writing down your thoughts, listen to music.

## Books can help you and your child to talk about anxiety

Recommended reading for parents/carers can be found in **Appendix 2**

The books referenced include strategies to support children with anxiety and are divided into Primary and Secondary phase.

## Online support and advice

ESCC support via [Open for Parents](#)

Contact [East Sussex Parent and Carer Forum](#) for further information on support for families of children and young people with additional needs: [info@espcf.org.uk](mailto:info@espcf.org.uk), tel: 0300 770 1367.

[Family Lives](#) - information, advice, and helpline

[Helping your children with a mental health problem | Mind, the mental health charity - help for mental health problems](#) - Mind - parenting with a mental health problem

[How to Take Care of Your Mental Health during Lockdown | NSPCC](#) - advice from the NSPCC on parenting, including parenting with mental health problems, parenting during covid etc.

[Parents Support Network | Facebook](#)

[Parenting support services | Action For Children](#) - advice for parents of children 0-19

[Parents and mental health - Mental Health Foundation](#) - advice on parenting with mental health problems

[Support for parents | NSPCC](#)

[Talking to your child about feelings - NHS \(www.nhs.uk\)](#)

[Young Minds parent/carer support](#) - toolkit and helpline

[Young Minds Parents Survival Guide](#)

[Young-minds-conversation-starters\\_final-003.pdf \(youngminds.org.uk\)](#) - conversation starters for parents

# Recommended reading for parent/carers

## Primary age

**The Huge Bag of Worries** - Education Endowment Fund

Virginia Ironside and Frank Rodgers

[Improving Social and Emotional Learning in Primary Schools | Education Endowment Foundation | EEF](#)

Pictorial story book

Pre-school Six recommendations for improving social and all emotional learning in primary schools

**The Invisible String** Patrice Karst

Storybook for primary age children to help children experiencing separation anxiety

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

Dawn Huebner and Bonnie Matthews

Explains in accessible way how anxiety is fueled.

## 6-12 years

**Think Good, Feel Good: A Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Workbook for Children and Young People** Education Endowment Fund

Paul Stallard

[Improving Social and Emotional Learning in Primary Schools | Education Endowment Foundation | EEF](#)

Chapters cover elements of CBT including identifying thinking traps; core beliefs; controlling feelings; changing behaviour; and more

10+ Summary of recommendations poster

**Blame My Brain: The Amazing Teenage Brain Revealed** - Nicola Morgan

Accessible explanations of adolescent brain development and behaviour

10+

## Secondary age

**Stem4 Supporting Teenage Mental Health** [stem4 - supporting teenage mental health](#)

## Age 13-16

Free CBT Apps for young people to download to manage anxiety and low mood

**We Heart CBT Worry Resources** Graded exposure planner

KS 3 & 4

[IHeartCBT - Anxiety Resources, Worry Resources | WeHeartCBT](#)

## **We Heart CBT Anxiety Resources** Practical worry problem solving

KS 2 & 3

[IHeartCBT - Anxiety Resources, Worry Resources | WeHeartCBT](#)

## **We Heart CBT - Symptoms of Anxiety** Bodily Symptoms of anxiety

KS 2 & 3

[IHeartCBT - Anxiety Resources, Worry Resources | WeHeartCBT](#)

## **We Heart CBT - Reducing worry in social situations**

KS 2 & 3

[IHeartCBT - Anxiety Resources, Worry Resources | WeHeartCBT](#)

## **We Heart CBT Explaining anxiety and its presentations**

KS 2 & 3

[IHeartCBT - Anxiety Resources, Worry Resources | WeHeartCBT](#)

## **We Heart CBT Booklet of strategies for managing worrying**

KS 2 & 3

[IHeartCBT - Anxiety Resources, Worry Resources | WeHeartCBT](#)

## **Life coaching for kids** - Nikki Giant

Age 9-16

Practical activities and worksheets to help with self-esteem and goal-setting

## **Anxiety workbook for teens** - Lisa M. Schab

11+

Practical activities and worksheets for use in groups or individually

**Think Good, Feel Good:** A Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Workbook for Children and Young People - Paul Stallard

10+

Chapters cover elements of CBT including identifying thinking traps; core beliefs; controlling feelings; changing behaviour; and more.

**Thinking Good, Feeling Better:** A Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Workbook for Adolescents and Young Adults - Paul Stallard

Teens and adults

Further resources and worksheets for group/individual use

## **Making friends with anxiety** - Sarah Rayner

Teens and adults

Shared lived experience and coping strategies

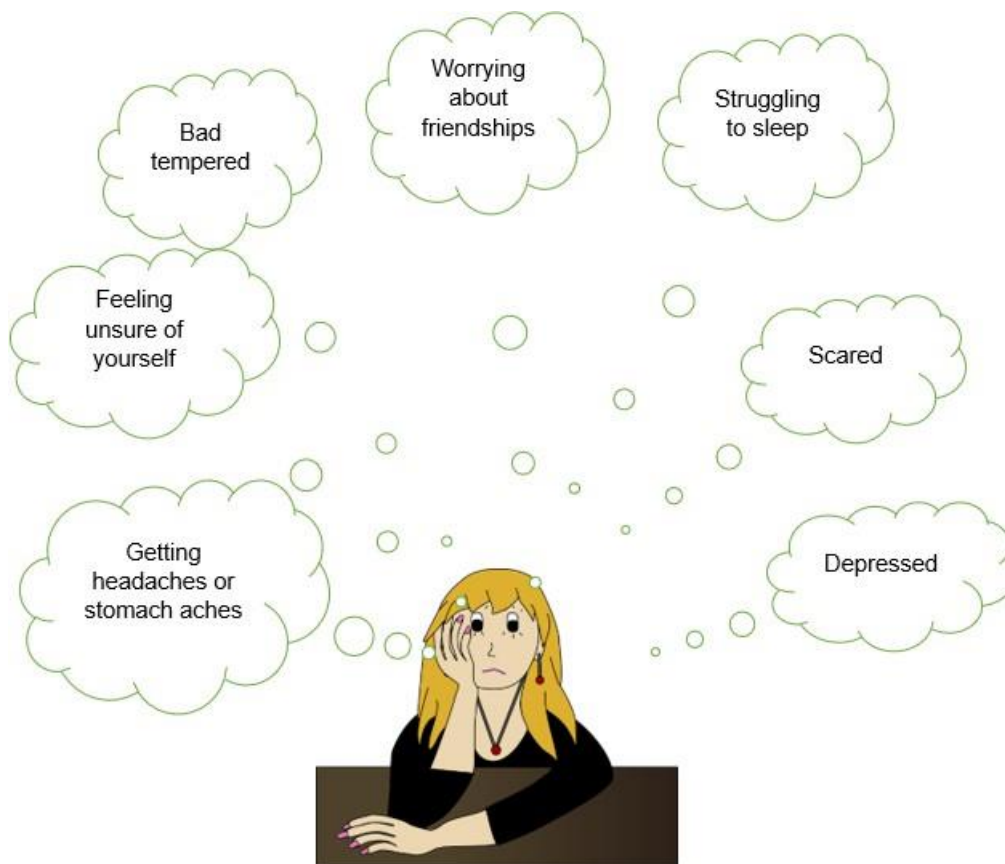


# EBSA Information for young people

## Are you feeling anxious about school?

Worrying or being anxious 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 us doing what we 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 our feelings can make us not want to attend school. If you have high levels of anxiety and worry about attending school, you may be experiencing Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA).

## When you think about school, are you:



- getting headaches or stomach aches
- feeling unsure
- Being bad tempered
- worrying about relationships
- struggling to sleep
- Being scared
- Feeling depressed

You are not on your own. We all feel like this from time to time because of things that happen in our lives at home, at school or elsewhere.

# What might make you feel this way?

## Things at school

- Problems with friendships
- Changing school
- Bullying
- Feeling too different to other people
- Worried about your appearance
- Pressure to achieve your target grades
- Don't like the noise in school
- Not understanding or coping with schoolwork
- Finding sports difficult
- Worried about getting changed for PE or games
- Not getting on with some teachers
- Anxious about exams and tests

## Things outside of school

- Death of somebody important to you
- Parents arguing or splitting up
- Members of your family feeling worried, depressed, or sad
- Death or loss of a pet
- Birth of a new brother or sister
- New people moving into your home
- Online bullying
- A parent who is ill
- Difficulties in getting to school
- Parents not understanding your feeling

## What happens when you don't attend school?

It is very important to try to overcome these difficulties as soon as possible. Sometimes you might feel that staying at home is the best thing to do as it makes you feel better.

However, the more time you spend out of school the more you miss out on lessons and the learning gets harder. You also miss out on seeing friends which means keeping friendships can become more difficult.

It is important to let an adult know if you are worried about anything in school or home and get the help to make it better rather than let things get worse and get stuck



*'What happens when I miss school'*

Cycle of events - what happens when I miss school?:

- Days missed from school
- miss out of friendships
- miss out on work
- feeling more left out and unhappy
- worry about going to school

## What do I do if I feel like this?

Most importantly, talk to somebody. This could be your parents, an adult at school, other family members or a friend. Think about the things that are worrying you, write a list or draw them then order them from most worried about to least worried about.

## What can your school do to help you?

Find an adult at school you trust and talk to them - they should listen and believe you. They can work with you and your parents to help find out what things are worrying you and what you and they can do to help you. Things they could do include: These actions could be written up into a support plan so that you, your parents and school know what actions have been agreed to help support you.

The plan might include things like:

- ✓ Helping with schoolwork or friendships
- ✓ Finding a safe space for you to go to
- ✓ Altering your timetable

## What can I do to get back to school?

If your worries are so big that you are not attending school, it is important that you work with your school and your parents to help you get back to attending school as soon as possible.

Things you can do to help include:

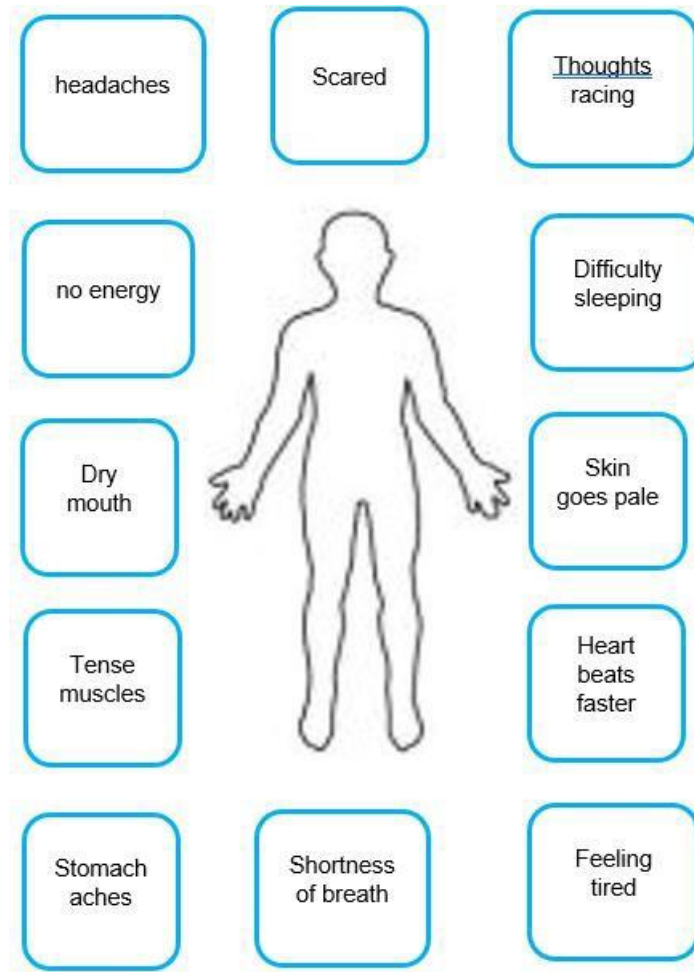
- ✓ Take part in the planning of how you will go back to school. Work with your parents and teachers to think of things that will help you.
- ✓ Think about a time that you did cope with a worry. What did you do then?

- ✓ Keep in contact with your friends and what is happening at school.
- ✓ Catch up on some of the work that you may have missed before you go back.
- ✓ Take little steps to get back into the routine - don't expect that everything will get back to normal or will be okay immediately.
- ✓ Take that chance! Once you are at school, it may not seem as bad.
- ✓ Acknowledge the steps you have taken and celebrate the small successes!

## What happens when you're worried?

When you are feeling worried...

Your whole body reacts when you are anxious.



Anxious reactions:

- Thoughts racing
- difficulty sleeping
- pale skin
- heart beats faster
- feeling tired
- Short of breath
- stomach aches
- tense muscles
- Dry mouth
- No energy
- headaches

- scared

Try to notice when you start to feel any of the signs above and stop take a moment. There are many different strategies to help you feel relaxed and calm when you are feeling stressed or anxious and you will need to find the ones that work for you.

We've shared some ideas on the next page for you to try.

## **Try relaxing your body**

Sit or lie somewhere quiet and comfortable

Stretch out your arms and make a fist, then relax

Push your legs out, wiggle your toes, and then relax

Shut your eyes tight and pull a scrunched-up face, and then relax

## **Try calm breathing**

Take a slow breath in through your nose for about 4 seconds

Hold it for 1 or 2 seconds

Slowly let it out through your mouth for about 4 seconds

Wait 5- 7 seconds before taking another breath

Repeat 5- 10 times

## **Try visualisation**

Close your eyes

Take slow deep breaths in and out

Think of your favourite place, maybe somewhere that you go on holiday Focus on the place and picture yourself there

What can you see?

What can you smell?

What can you feel?

## **Try physical exercise**

This increases your heart rate and releases endorphins that make you feel good.

Running, going to the gym, cycling, skateboarding, surfing, horse-riding, swimming or team sports such as football or netball are all great exercise. Choose one you love and build your exercise routine around that.

## **Think balanced thoughts**

If you find yourself thinking a negative thought or worry a lot of the time e.g. 'I will fail all my exams because I am stupid'.

Try thinking of a more balanced or positive thought instead e.g. 'If I work hard, I'll do ok in my exam'.

Every time you notice yourself thinking the negative thought - stop and tell yourself the positive thought.

# Places to go to get more help

## Local support (in East Sussex)

[www.e-wellbeing.co.uk](http://www.e-wellbeing.co.uk) (covers all of Sussex)

i-rock - [www.sussexpartnership.nhs.uk/irock](http://www.sussexpartnership.nhs.uk/irock) - A virtual drop in service for young people in East Sussex aged 14-25. Support for mental health and other issues.

Discovery College - creative courses for 12-20s.

## National support

Childline comforts, advises and protects children 24 hours a day and offers free confidential counselling. Phone 0800 1111 (24 hours) [www.childline.org](http://www.childline.org)

Young Minds is the UK's leading charity championing the wellbeing and mental health of young people [www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk)

The Mix provides information, support and listening for people under 25. Phone 0808 808 4994 (24 hours) [www.themix.org.uk](http://www.themix.org.uk)

Anna Freud Centre - *On my Mind* is an online platform with lots of information for young people to support their mental health and access services. Their website is <https://www.annafreud.org/on-my-mind/>

This leaflet was written by the West Sussex Educational Psychology Service and localised by East Sussex County Council.