Emotionally-based school avoidance (EBSA) – COVID-19 Intervention timeline

Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) describes a group of children and young people who experience difficulty in attending school. Some researchers make a distinction between EBSA and those who are absent from school due to truanting, others believe emotional reasons are behind all non-attendance. The government measures all non-attendance in one statistic called ‘Persistent absence’, which also includes long-term illness, but that is a small proportion of the overall figure. It is generally estimated that up to 5% of children miss prolonged periods of school. There is a slightly higher prevalence amongst secondary school students, but it is reported to be equally common in males and females. Some researchers suggest it is equally spread across socioeconomic status, but it appears government figures indicate that children from poorer / more deprived households are at greater risk.

Prior to school closure, a number of our pupils may have experienced attendance difficulties. These students may have been at home, on a reintegration timetable, or have started to display some avoidance behaviour. Factors which indicate vulnerability to EBSA are outlined below, but we also know that these can be maintained by periods of absence, including; change in relationships due to isolation, concerns over friendships, being or fear of being behind in schoolwork, decreased motivation to attend and anxiety relating to these factors. We anticipate, therefore, that the school closures may have exacerbated the difficulties experienced for these pupils. Some may also experience anxiety relating to catching the virus. The following timeline provides research and evidence-based guidance for schools in supporting students experiencing EBSA following school closure.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationships&lt;sup&gt;f&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Agency and Control&lt;sup&gt;g&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Practical Support&lt;sup&gt;h&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parental experience – sense of desperation and perceived lack of support</td>
<td>Parental experience – emotional impact on parents and sense of desperation / lack of control</td>
<td>Parental experience – value of an individualised approach</td>
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<tr>
<td>Support - Holistic approach, Relationships with peers, relationships with teachers, relationship between home and school, young people recognising the impact of EBSA, confidence and experience of key adults involved, availability of others to parents and young people</td>
<td>Support - Child and Family having input to the return to school process, the structure of the day and learning environment, motivation and autonomy; making sense of experiences of EBSA (emotional literacy, self-esteem)</td>
<td>Support - Home-school support and communication, gradual and flexible return, links and supported access to other agencies, space in school, managing worries and social support</td>
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The three key elements to helping children return after a period of prolonged non-attendance (these re-enforce the five psychological principles that are highlighted in the broader support for returning to school after Covid-19 distancing):
<table>
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<th>Week 1</th>
<th>Week 2</th>
<th>Week 3</th>
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As soon as possible

1. Email and text all parents to provide the name and number of a designated person they can contact if they have any concerns about their child returning to school. If no email or phone, send letter.
2. Identify pupils you deem at risk, these may include:
   - Pupils attending below 90% prior to school closure
   - Pupils who have been on a reintegration timetable prior to school closure
   - Pupils with a history of attendance difficulties
   - Pupils with a history of anxiety or friendship issues
   - Pupils whose parents have phoned school to raise concerns

This pupil vulnerability screening tool can also help go into more depth:

Screening Tool for Transition post-COVID

2-3 weeks prior to school opening

1. Contact the parents or carers directly of all pupils identified to set up a meeting or conversation about their and their child or young person’s needs.
2. Where possible, contact the child or young person directly to do the same.
3. Contact any other agencies involved with the pupil to ensure everyone is aware of the situation. Ensure parents also have contact details and easy access to support from these professionals where appropriate.
4. **Meet with pupil and parent/carer** (this may be remotely). Discuss and agree draft reintegration plan - focus on strengths, what the child is willing to attend e.g. a class or part of the day; give choice wherever possible. Explore preferred subjects/staff/times of day, identify teachers and pupils that the child or young person feels particularly comfortable with, strategies that might help with attendance/engagement, strategies that have worked well in the past. Agree a time to review progress.
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5. Identify ‘Push’ factors (i.e. those that push the child towards attending school) and ‘Pull’ factors (i.e. those pull the child away from attending school) to help inform the return to school support arrangements. These questions may support exploration of these factors:

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

6. Double check any planned pupil groupings – e.g. for project work, sports or any extra-curricular work and ensure the pupil is not in any new or unexpected groupings.

7. Allocate a member of staff to be a dedicated contact person for the family. Ensure this person will have the time and ability / resilience and support to take on this role.

1-2 weeks prior to school opening

1. Establish regular communication with pupil and parent/ carer, addressing any concerns raised.

2. Help parents establish routine which replicates the school week, including suggestions around sleep, regular morning routine, break times, practising the walk / route to school etc. But only if the child is willing. No extra pressure at this point.

3. If the pupil has been engaging with school work during school closure, ensure this has regular positive feedback from staff.

4. Agree a plan for the first day – Who will meet them (keyworker/ buddy)? Where can they go if they are anxious? Will teachers know to excuse them if required? How will this be communicated? This gives a sense of security and trust in your agreed plan. It can be useful if the family plan a reward/ pleasant activity after school. Provide a written copy of what is agreed. Share the plan, key concerns and advice with all subject teachers and staff supporting so there is a consistent approach.

5. Plan extra staff for playground and lunch halls if required to ensure monitoring and that the pupil knows there will be support there if needed.

6. Allocate a space in the school that can be a hub / breakout room for children who find lessons overwhelming and need a space to go to, rather than leave.
## Ongoing support

1. Ensure all teachers and school staff are aware of the child’s needs so can support or guide towards support – including how the pupil will signal anxiety and how to respond.

2. Provide regular supported opportunities to calm during the school day (supported by identified key person).

3. Consider graduated increase in expectation (e.g. time in school, time in lessons) based on progress (plan, do review). Ensure all steps are negotiated and agreed with the pupil, moving at their pace.

4. Consider a programme of ELSA work across the school, or implementing an evidence-based emotional literacy programme for all students.

## Emerging concerns

It is possible that some pupils, who may not have experienced any previous difficulties relating to attendance, may do so as restrictions are lifted and a phased return to school begins. The figure below highlights the spectrum of school avoidance behaviour, and can help guide thinking and planning early intervention. Some general guidance relating to emerging attendance concerns is summarised here:
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[Table with columns for different types of school avoidance, such as School attendance with anxiety, including somatic symptoms, Behaviour in the mornings to avoid school, Repeated lateness in the morning followed by attendance, Periodic absences or missing classes mixed with attendance, Repeated absences of missing classes followed by attendance, Complete absence from school for a period of time, Complete absence from school for an extended period of time.]

5 Birmingham Educational Psychology Service (2020) Supporting children with transition during the school closures. Available http://www.birminghameducationsupportservices.co.uk/