

Oxfordshire Educational Psychology Service

Supporting your child with negative feelings about school : A Parent/Carer Guide



EBSA- Emotionally Based School Avoidance

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Introduction

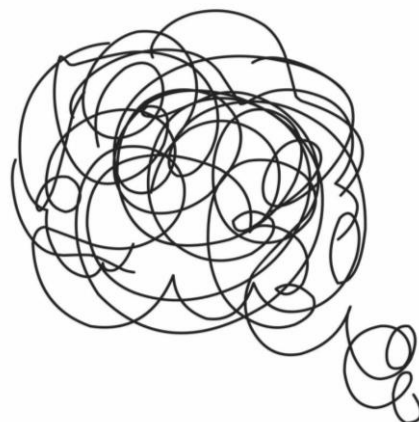
Many children and young people will worry or feel negative about things in school from time to time. However, sometimes a child finds it very difficult to attend school because of strong feelings, such as anxiety, worry, or stress. These feelings can become so intense that getting to school – or staying in school – feels unmanageable for them. This can be referred to as **EBSA (Emotionally Based School Avoidance)**. It is important to know that this behaviour is usually a sign that something is causing emotional discomfort, even if your child can't explain exactly what that is.

This guide is to give you some ideas around how you can support your child when they show intense negative feelings that are impacting on their engagement in school life.

What can cause worries about school and school avoidance?

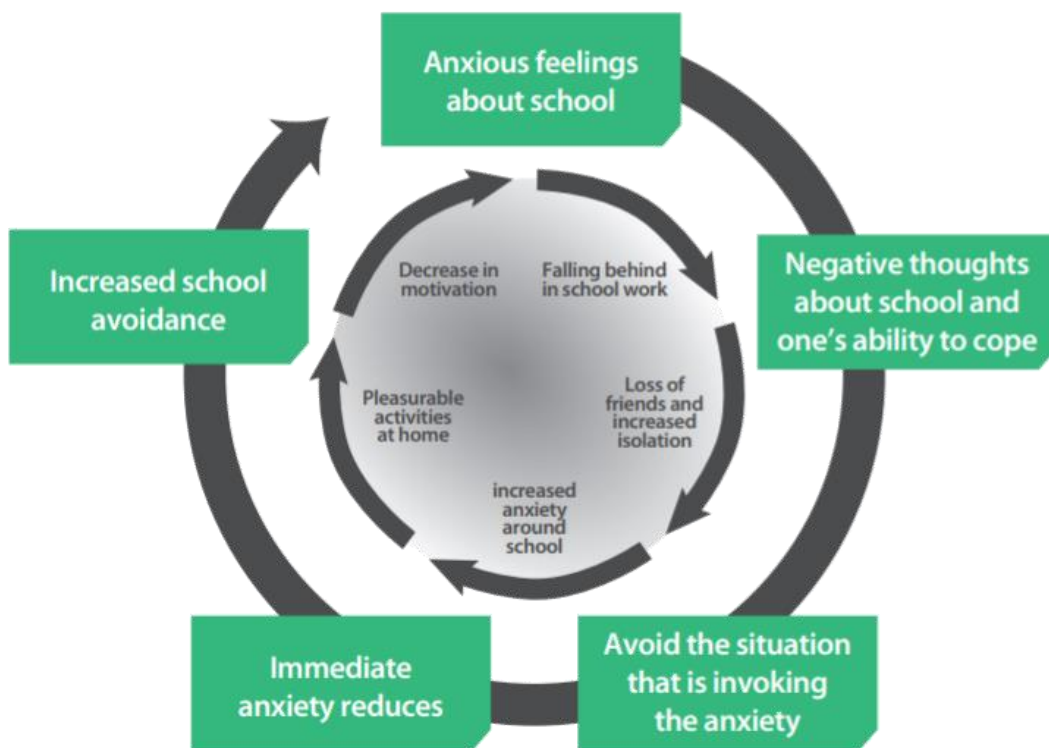
It is likely that there is more than one cause. It may be related to

- Friendship worries or bullying
- Moving class, moving school
- Change in teachers
- Recent bereavement
- Worries about separating from parent or carer
- Moving home
- General lack of confidence, difficulties managing change
- SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disability) such as finding learning difficult
- Neurodivergence, such as those with Autism or ADHD.



The Anxiety Cycle

The diagram below shows how difficulties can increase over time:



Adapted from West Sussex
Educational Psychology Service

What is the anxiety cycle?

When a child begins to worry about school, they may not know what to do with those feelings. The only strategy they have is avoiding school or lessons. This may bring them immediate relief, but the relief is only temporary, as the negative feelings are still there, because they were never addressed.

The inner circle shows that avoiding school also brings further complications, leading to increased negative feelings. For example; they worry that due to missed lessons, they won't understand if they go back in. This adds further to those anxious feelings.

Recognising the Early Warning Signs

Recognising the early warning signs and communicating these with school can help prevent your child feeling overwhelmed about school. It is likely that you will start to see issues developing at home before school staff are aware of a problem. You might notice things like:

- Upset and fearfulness around attending school (particularly on Sunday evenings or in the mornings before school).
- Complaints of stomach pain, headache or other feelings of being unwell without the physical sign of illness.
- Increased distress or resistance in the mornings, withdrawing, running away, or lashing out, which could be signs that your child is feeling overwhelmed or distressed about school.



How Can You Help?

It is important to establish good communication with a key named person in school. This could be:

- SENCo (Special Educational Needs Coordinator)
- Assistant Head Teacher
- Teacher
- Home School Link Worker
- Tutor
- Head of Year
- Deputy Head of Year
- Pastoral Lead



The School will want to explore with you the reasons behind the child's negative feelings and the factors which will support your child to feel settled in school.

Planning For a Meeting in School

Prior to the meeting:

1. Try and find out the reasons behind your child's feelings and gain their views. ([See 'Talking With Your Child'](#)) Find out which staff members your child likes and trusts.
2. Keep notes or a diary about when your child is becoming unsettled or distressed, as well as when they are feeling happy about school. Note date, time, what happened, and what helped. Look for any patterns.
3. Write down the main areas of worry and what or who seems to help.
4. If your child is too young or it will be distressing for them to attend the meeting, think about how their views will be represented.
5. Find further helpful advice at [SENDIASS](#).

At the meeting:

1. Agree who your link will be in school, how you will communicate with each other (in person, parent-school book, phone call, email, text), and when.
2. Based on what you know about your child and what the school have found, agree a written plan. This could be in a pupil profile, or a support plan format.
3. Agree how this will be shared with your child and agree how changes to the plan can be made to reflect your child's feedback views (if they are not at the meeting).
4. Agree a review date (this will vary depending on the situation but usually will be in 4 to 6 weeks).
5. Agree what will happen if the review meeting needs to be earlier or things are escalating for your child.



What Can I Expect From School?

Schools will:





- Listen carefully to you and your child and acknowledge the challenges.
- Make reasonable adjustments for your child to support them.
- Maintain close contact with you and your child, especially during extended periods of non-engagement.
- Agree on a member of staff who will be named as your 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.
- Hold meetings to devise a plan with you and your child. The plan should include what the next steps will be. Respond to any school-based needs, such as academic support, SEND needs, dealing with bullying or support with social relationships.
- 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.
- Consider requesting involvement from other professionals, if difficulties persist.



Talking With Your Child

- Think about the right time and the right place to start a conversation with your child. This might be whilst doing another activity, such as driving in the car, going for a walk, being outside, or playing a game.
- If you are seated, sitting side by side rather than opposite each other can be helpful.
- Ask them what is creating negative feelings for them, take their concerns seriously.
- Children can find it hard to communicate what they are feeling and why. They might not know what they are feeling or have difficulties finding the right words or might feel embarrassed to say it out loud. Some children may find it difficult to verbalise how they are feeling in person and may prefer to write it down, put it in an email or text, or draw how they are feeling.
- It is likely that your child’s school has a range of visual emotion communication resources that they use in school. For example, they might use the Zones of Regulation curriculum or the Incredible 5-point Scale.
- Ask the SENCo to share the key resources they use in school so that you can use them at home as well. You might also be able to share ideas for how to personalise these resources, based on your child’s interests.

An example: ‘Feelings Chart’

Feelings Chart	
How I feel	What I can do
5  I need some help!	<input type="checkbox"/> Ask to go visit Mrs. Holland <input type="checkbox"/> Ask to take a break/use therapy <input type="checkbox"/> Hold on to Luke Skywalker (if he is here) <input type="checkbox"/> Take 4 or 5 deep breaths
4  I'm really upset.	<input type="checkbox"/> Ask to go visit Mrs. Holland <input type="checkbox"/> Ask to take a break/use therapy <input type="checkbox"/> Hold on to Luke Skywalker (if he is here) <input type="checkbox"/> Take 4 or 5 deep breaths
3  I've got a problem.	<input type="checkbox"/> Let a teacher know that you have a problem and need some help <input type="checkbox"/> Play with your squishy thing <input type="checkbox"/> Hold on to Luke Skywalker (if he is here) <input type="checkbox"/> Take 4 or 5 deep breaths
2  Things are pretty good.	<input type="checkbox"/> Play with my squishy thing <input type="checkbox"/> Think of my favorite things <input type="checkbox"/> Say "I'm going to be O.K." to yourself <input type="checkbox"/> Take 3 or 4 deep breaths
1  Feeling Great!	<input type="checkbox"/> Enjoy the feeling! <input type="checkbox"/> Have fun

Helpful Ideas on How to Respond to Your Child

- Talk calmly and hopefully about school, while validating your child's feelings and acknowledging what feels hard for them right now.
- Let your child know it's okay to feel worried, angry, or sad — and that they don't have to fix these feelings alone.
- Focus on positives with your child: What are the three best things about school? Who are the adults that they feel supported by?
- Think with them about any changes that could be made at home or in school that would help them feel safe in the school setting.
- Validate their feelings and think about solutions together. For example:

“It makes sense that you feel scared about going in — I’m here to help work out why.”

“You’re not in trouble. I know something feels hard right now.”

“It sounds like school feels really stressful at the moment. I can see why you’re upset — let’s think about what might help.”

Emotion Coaching Techniques have been found to be useful for children with negative feelings and worries about school. The following link gives you more information on this.
[Emotion Coaching - United Kingdom](#)



Some Practical Ideas to Help Support Your Child

- It can be useful to make the forthcoming day and week familiar and predictable for your child, using consistent routines and schedules. Your child might find it soothing to know what you will be doing (and other members of the household, including pets) when they are at school. This could be further supported with pictures.
- Perhaps think about the journey to school and how this can be made easier for them.
- Build in your child's preferred activities to relax them during the evenings (particularly Sunday evening).
- On Monday mornings have everything organised and ready.
- Plan a fun, family activity on a weeknight to help shift their focus from the school week.
- Help them feel part of the school community in ways that feel manageable for them, this might include joining a club at school or talking to staff about what special roles they can have in school e.g. library helper.
- Keep to a regular routine, including regular bedtimes, with some screen-free time before bed and keep phones downstairs.



Some Practical Ideas to Help Support Your Child

- If your child is unable to attend school, maintaining a gentle routine will help them feel more secure. Consider a balanced structure to the day, including:
 - Opportunities to engage in activities that are calming and relaxing
 - Time when they can focus on their own interests
 - Movement breaks
 - Opportunities for education-oriented activities e.g. work from school, online learning, or project work following the interests of your child.
- Ask for academic work from school to be sent home, if they can't manage academic work ask for a project they could do instead. The work should be achievable to give them a sense of success.
- Reintegration plans should focus on what your child can manage and needs. Each step needs to feel secure for your child before moving on to another step, this may take some time. Your child's views will be key to these plans.
- Exercise is helpful, even if it is for a short walk. Try and establish regular times when you leave the house to go for a walk, go to the playground or visit friends and family.
- Try and keep hobbies, clubs and activities that happen out of the school day going if possible and based on your child's interests and needs.
- Focus on developing their feelings of wellbeing, look at the NHS website for details [Five Ways to Wellbeing](#)

Crisis and safeguarding: If your child talks about harming themselves or you are worried about immediate safety, call 999. For urgent mental health help, call 111 and ask for the mental health team or your local crisis line.

Looking After Yourself

As a parent or carer of a child with negative feelings towards school, it is important to look after yourself. Make sure that you have someone to talk to. This could be a friend, family member or an organisation such as those listed below. Some of these organisations can also give more detailed advice or support for your child.



Oxfordshire SEND Room is a parent-carer led online peer support community, hosted and moderated by the Oxfordshire Parent Carers Forum (**OxPCF**), for parents and carers of children and young people (0–25) with SEND in Oxfordshire. It provides a safe, non-judgemental space to share experiences, concerns and questions.

Events | OxPCF info@oxpcf.org.uk



07394 735666

Carers Oxfordshire and **Oxfordshire Mind** offer emotional and mental health support for unpaid carers, including parent carers. Support includes listening support, peer groups, counselling and wellbeing advice, available free or low-cost, locally and online.

carersinfo@carersoxfordshire.org.uk

Carers Line: 01235 424715

info@oxfordshiremind.org.uk

Phone: 01865 247788

Text: 07451 277973



CAMHS

NHS specialist mental health service for children and young people, providing assessment and therapeutic intervention.
www.oxfordhealth.nhs.uk/camhs

SENDIASS

Free, impartial advice and support on SEND, EHCPs and education rights for families and young people.
SENDIASS Oxfordshire – Provide Support to people with SENs in Oxfordshire



Additional Resources/Services

YOUNGMINDS

Youngminds is 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.

<https://youngminds.org.uk>



Action for Children is a UK children's charity providing practical and emotional support to children, young people and families. They run local services across the country, including early help, family support, mental health support and safeguarding work, and campaign to improve outcomes for vulnerable children.

<https://parents.actionforchildren.org.uk/>

Parent Support Line

Place2Be is a children's mental health charity providing in-school counselling and emotional wellbeing support. They also offer downloadable tools and resources for children, families and schools to support mental health and emotional literacy.

Improving children's and young people's mental health – Place2Be



Suggested Resources for Children and Parents to Use Together

The following are some books and interactive tools that help parents support children with their worries, especially around school.

For children (best shared with a parent or carer):

The Huge Bag of Worries – Virginia Ironside

Hey Warrior – Karen Young

All Birds Have Anxiety – Kathy Hoopmann

Ruby's Worry – Tom Percival

The Colour Monster – Anna Llenas

Activity and workbook-style (parent and child together):

What to Do When You Worry Too Much – Dawn Huebner

Think Good, Feel Good – Paul Stallard

My Hidden Chimp – Prof Steve Peters

