Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA) for parents and carers

Staff training to provide parent / carer support for emotionally based school attendance difficulties

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Dr Judith McAlister

Judith@jempsychology.co.uk

Educational and Child Psychologist – JEM Psychology

Part of the PEIA Attendance Project for DCCT

What we will cover this morning

- Explaining EBSNA to parents and carers, referred to as parents throughout
- Help them understand what anxiety is so they can help their child
- Push and pull factors
- Practical advice and approaches for families to use in supporting a child experiencing EBSNA
- Guidance on how to deliver a successful parent/carer session
  - Supporting your child
  - Looking after yourself
  - What to expect from your school setting
  - Where to get information and support
- Example resources and materials to run your own 'in house' sessions

The need for empathy for parents

- Parents of children experiencing EBSNA have probably had a long and challenging journey to get support. They may:

  - have faced or be facing daily battles getting their child to school
  - worry that they are causing trauma to their child by insisting on going to school. Be aware that there is a strong parent voice 'out there' advocating for alternative provision / non attendance / home schooling especially given the limitations of the school curriculum and pressure from exams etc.
  - feel let down and frustrated by professionals who have not acknowledged the level of stress for the child and the family

- Start the session referring to this and acknowledging the difficult journey they have been on and emphasise that you will work with them to try and make things better for their child and the family

- Be cautious about over-promising too! If you can't deliver on something you've promised this will damage trust and create frustration or anger in the parent

Who do you invite and how to engage parents?

- You will need to first decide if you are working with parents individually or in groups- benefits and drawbacks of each

- Which parents are you targeting? Early intervention and / or stuck situations?

- How to share the information- informally or more structured?

- When and where?

- Is school the best place? Could you book a community venue instead?

- Day time or evening?

- One off session or a series? Staff capacity

What is EBSNA?

- Families will be anxious and need to know that this is something that happens to lots of children and young people, and that things can improve- we must be hopeful and encourage parents to work together with us to make a plan.

- 2023 data- 1 in 5 children are persistently absent, i.e. missing 10% or more of school

- Parents / carers need a key contact person who is empathetic, compassionate and proactive. Staff need to build trust with parents / carers, as many will have had very negative experiences so far

- Be aware of the language used to describe this difficulty- not avoidance or refusal- we must be compassionate about the complex interplay of all the barriers to attendance

- Be very clear about this being distinct from other reasons for non-attendance, such as truanting

- We know from research that COVID lockdowns and partial school closures / remote learning has had a direct impact on attendance – it is a nationwide pattern, and has been recognised as such at Gov't level

- FYI there is guidance around attendance which was issued in May 2022 and updated in March 2024

- Link here

EBSNA defined

- Sustained non attendance due to emotional factors, generally anxiety but this can also look like anger and controlling behaviours
- Some children will be showing signs of this, but may still be (reluctantly) attending school
- Some children will manage school but experience overwhelm when they return home to their safe space- this is called masking
- A high proportion (but not all) of those experiencing EBSNA have a diagnosis of autism or traits of autism and other neurodivergent conditions, such as ADHD, dyslexic, dyscalculic or dyspraxic traits, Tourette's
- Research done by Not Fine in School 2020 said that anxiety, sensory needs, friendship issues and unmet SEND were the main reasons
- There are a range of factors at school and at home that can affect how able children are to attend school- known as push and pull factors

Who does this affect?

- We also know that numbers of CYP with mental health needs are rising, and waiting times and turn downs to services are on the rise too

- Poverty is increasing and this has a huge impact on mental health

- SEND needs are also affected by services being overwhelmed, e.g. funding within schools has been stretched and external services are not so readily available; EHCPs are on the rise, leading to long delays

- Pupils with SEND are more likely to miss school due to unmet needs

- Pupils with neurodivergent conditions, are also over-represented in this group

- Pupils affected by bullying, racism, as well as young carers, those who are care experienced or who have experienced adverse childhoods, are over-represented in the statistics too

- (John et al 2021; In Not in School- Mental Health Barriers to Attendance 2024)

The Local Picture

March 2018- Derby was ranked fifth worst in England for school absences, with more than 5,000 pupils who were persistently missing class.

Figures published by the Department for Education showed that there were 5,166 "persistent absentees" in the city - and 9,293 in Derbyshire.

The factors at play in EBSNA

Predisposing factors-who is most at risk due to personal or family, school and community circumstances, including ACEs, neurodivergent groups

Precipitating factors- sudden or traumatic life events that may trigger non-attendance, including bullying, bereavement, COVID

Maintaining Factors-factors which can prolong the problem (gaps in attainment; avoidance of questions on return to school; disrupted sleep patterns; breakdown of relationships with school; avoidance of anxiety symptoms, i.e. avoidance of school)

Activity

<u>Could be a useful discussion with parents at this stage to explore the timeline of their child's difficulties</u>

Some suggested key questions:

1. How would you describe your child's personality?
2. How did they separate from you at nursery or reception? Has there always been anxiety?
3. Do they have any neurodevelopmental or other diagnoses that mean they find change etc. difficult?
4. Has anything traumatic or significant happened within the family? E.g. bereavement, illness, relationship breakdown, house and school, move, bullying ......

<u>What else could you ask?</u>

Early possible signs of anxiety-based school reluctance- supporting early is best

ASK PARENTS

Does your child display any of the following?:

- Frequently feeling unwell, especially on a Sunday night or following a half term
- Separation anxiety
- Frequent minor absences
- Tearfulness and general irritability
- Sleep difficulties
- Emotional volatility- easily upset, up and down
- Lack of appetite
- Friendship issues
- Changes in personality
- Poor academic attainment
- Autistic meltdowns on arrival home, having been 'fine' in school

Push and pull factors

- Parents and carers need to be aware of these and their own possible role in the cycle of non-attendance

- Parents / carers will be sensitive about any suggestion of blame or shame linked to their parenting choices- they will have done what they feel is right for their child, sometimes with unintended consequences

Push factors

These are possible factors that push CYP away from school

Such as:

- Self-awareness and self-regulation skills (coping skills) undeveloped
- Negative thought cycles
- Not motivated to go to school – doesn't see it as important
- Sensory sensitivities
- Poor previous experiences of school
- Difficult or absent relationships with staff or students
- Learning needs, not being addressed
- Other SEND

Push Factors

- **Some school Factors- lead to increased anxiety**

- School climate (high pressured or bullying)

- Rigid and overly punitive attitudes and approaches

- Rigidity of the school system which does not fit well for some CYP, and a lack of personalisation and flexibility

- School size and stage of education (transitions partic Y6-Y7; exam pressure)

- Social exclusion

- Poor relationships with staff

- Peer group also not attending

- Overwhelming environment- sensory needs

Other Push factors

Returning to school after a period of absence

Gaps in learning and help not available

Referrals to other agencies needed

Sleep routine impacting on attendance

Relationships between home and school breaking down

What else?

Pull factors- individual

Factors that make your CYP more likely to want to be at home

Such as:

- Poor sleep routine, and being able to stay in bed with low expectations about getting up and out

- Gaming addiction

- Anxiety related to school attendance, which reduces when they stay at home

- Social anxiety or neurodivergent based social difficulties

- What else?

Possible Family Pull Factors

- Negative or ambivalent parent / carer attitude towards school
- Access to fun and low demand things at home, e.g. gaming
- Poverty including difficulties with uniform, equipment or period poverty
- Domestic abuse
- Alcohol or substance misuse
- Mental ill health in the family
- Being a young carer
- Other siblings not attending
- Co-dependence- parent needing the child at home
- Travelling community
- Poor housing conditions and homelessness / sofa surfing
- Bereavement or sudden trauma (eviction, burglary...)

"1 in 10 girls can't afford to buy menstrual products"
The Red Box Project

"Menstrual hygiene is a fundamental human right, NOT a privilege."

#EndPeriodPoverty

Parent activity

Push factors	Pull factors	Actions

What is Anxiety?

- Discuss on your tables and feedback

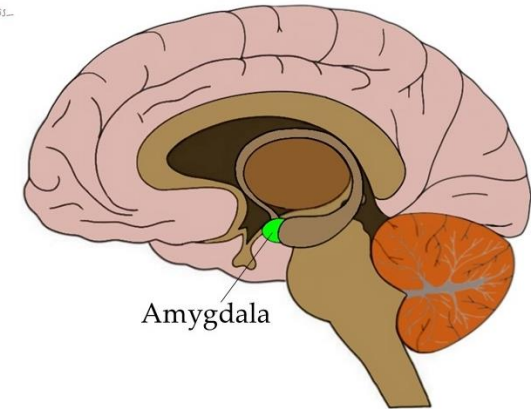- You could ask parents to do this as part of your session in school

What is anxiety?

- A natural emotional response to perceived and real threat or danger

- Manifests in the body and the mind / brain (amygdala)

- Is a survival instinct aimed at keeping you safe from harm

- It cannot discriminate between real or perceived threat and responds in the same way in either case

- It serves as a useful motivator when it is not overwhelming (preparing for exams, or job interview) but can be very uncomfortable when it is elevated

- Usually involves one of 5 responses- fight, flight, freeze, flop and fawn

- Children who cannot attend school are usually engaged in their flight mode- this is not a planned response, it is automatic, BUT how we adults respond to the CYP can either alter or embed this response

- Parents /carers will naturally want to eradicate these unpleasant and sometimes terrifying feelings in their child
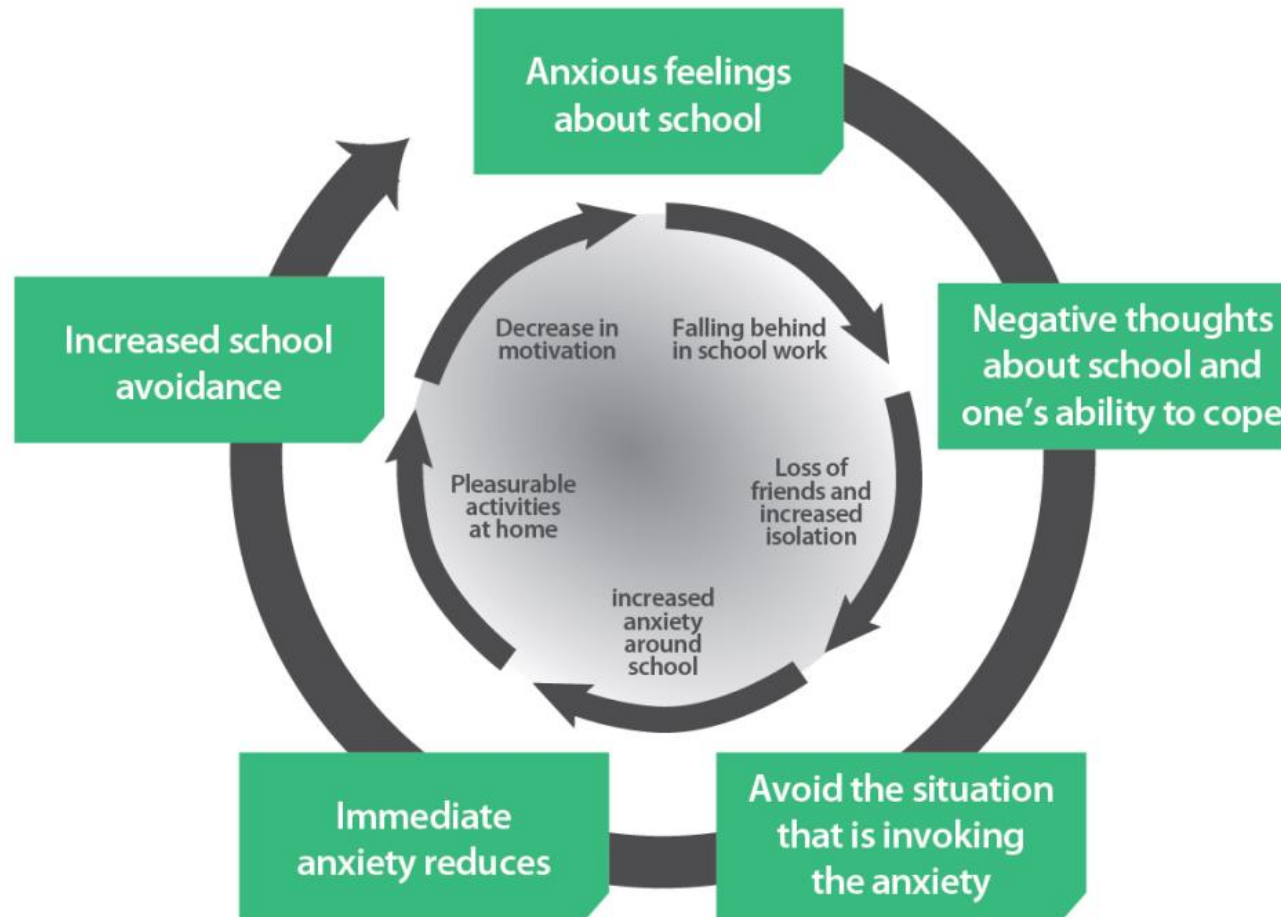
What happens in the body and brain?

- Encourage parents / carers to reflect on times they have felt anxious themselves, and describe how that feels in their bodies; thoughts racing through their minds; how they might behave etc

- This would be a good time to use a body / mind map and draw or write onto this, as parents give their ideas

- This will develop empathy for their child

- What do they see in their own child in moments of anxiety? Link to infographs for child and young person

- We must reinforce the message that all feelings are normal, to be expected and a natural automatic response to various events outside of ourselves, or to our own thoughts within

ANXIETY
↳ MAY PRESENT ITSELF AS...
← FATIGUE
HEADACHES OR LIGHTHEADEDNESS →
← TIGHT THROAT
FEELING SICK
← SORE OR 'FLUTTERY' TUMMY
RESTLESS OR SHAKY HANDS →
← UPSET | IRRITABLE BOWELS
SHAKY LEGS & FIDGETING →
@journey_to_wellness_

Amygdala

The Anxiety Cycle and How to Break It

What to do:

- Identify triggers
- Identify negative thought patterns
- Challenge thoughts
- Explore ways of calming / regulating
- Gradually face some anxiety provoking situations to build resilience / coping skills

The power of our thoughts

- We all have unhelpful thinking patterns sometimes that can hinder us

- This can be a good psychoeducation tool for parents to discuss with their child

- Some examples of unhelpful (but natural) thinking:

How To Change 🤔 Negative Thoughts

DWELLING
Don't dwell on the bad. Change it or move on.

IT'LL GET BETTER...
Don't idly hope that a situation will change in the future. Work on it now.

NEEDING APPROVAL
The only person who needs to approve of you is you.

MIND READING
Don't presume you know what other people are thinking or feeling. You're probably psychic

AUTOMATIC NEGATIVE THOUGHTS
Challenge ingrained negative thoughts with positive new ones.

CATASTROPHIZING
Realise that it's not the end of the world.

"SHOULD"
Change "Should" statements to "I want to... because..."

ALL OR NOTHING!
Realise that what you think is all-important probably isn't such a big deal

PESSIMISM
The glass is also half-full.

DISQUALIFYING POSITIVES
Accept that yes, there is good in the world, it's not all bad!

NEGATIVE SELF-LABELING
Have a realistic view of yourself that balances both the positive and the negative.

Activity

- What kinds of activities would you want to do with parents to help them understand anxiety?

- Have a look at the resources I've provided, and discuss if they would be appropriate or whether you might need to change them to suit child age range etc.

- What else have you thought of?

Feedback to the group to share ideas

Ways parents / carers can support their child

- Plan ahead- Sundays and after half terms etc

- Invite discussion with their child

- Honesty and openness- hear the child's worries and fears without judgement (this is NOT easy!)

- Emotion coach

- Teach children about anxiety and how it presents- psychoeducation

- Talk to school staff to make a plan and request adaptations

- Reassure your child that school, you and they will work together to make things more manageable for them

- Try to avoid feeding the anxiety- learn about the anxiety cycle

How to help your child cope with their feelings of anxiousness

- Acknowledge and validate it as a normal emotion
- Help them to calm down, using a hug, breathing exercises, distraction etc
- Stay calm yourself, even if this situation makes you anxious
- Give them time and space to talk if they can or want to
- Avoid asking too many questions or putting other ideas of worry in their heads
- Make a plan together, about how to tackle this
- Encourage them to learn about the anxiety cycle, and to think about how avoidance is not going to help them cope and build resilience

Stress Bucket Analogy
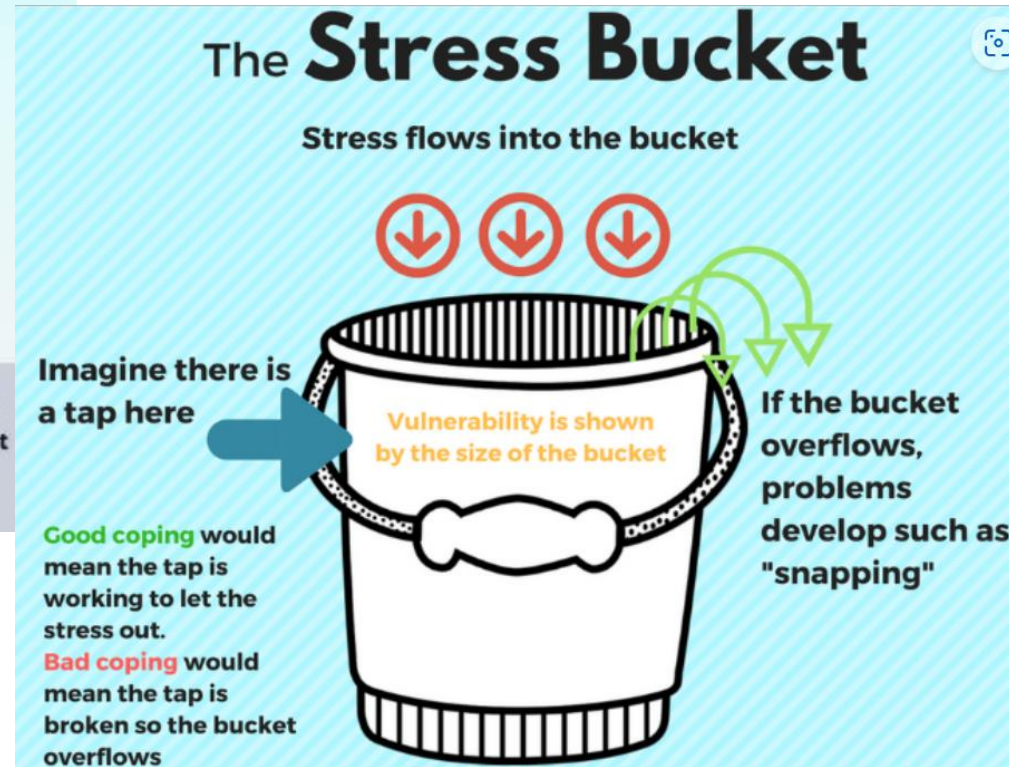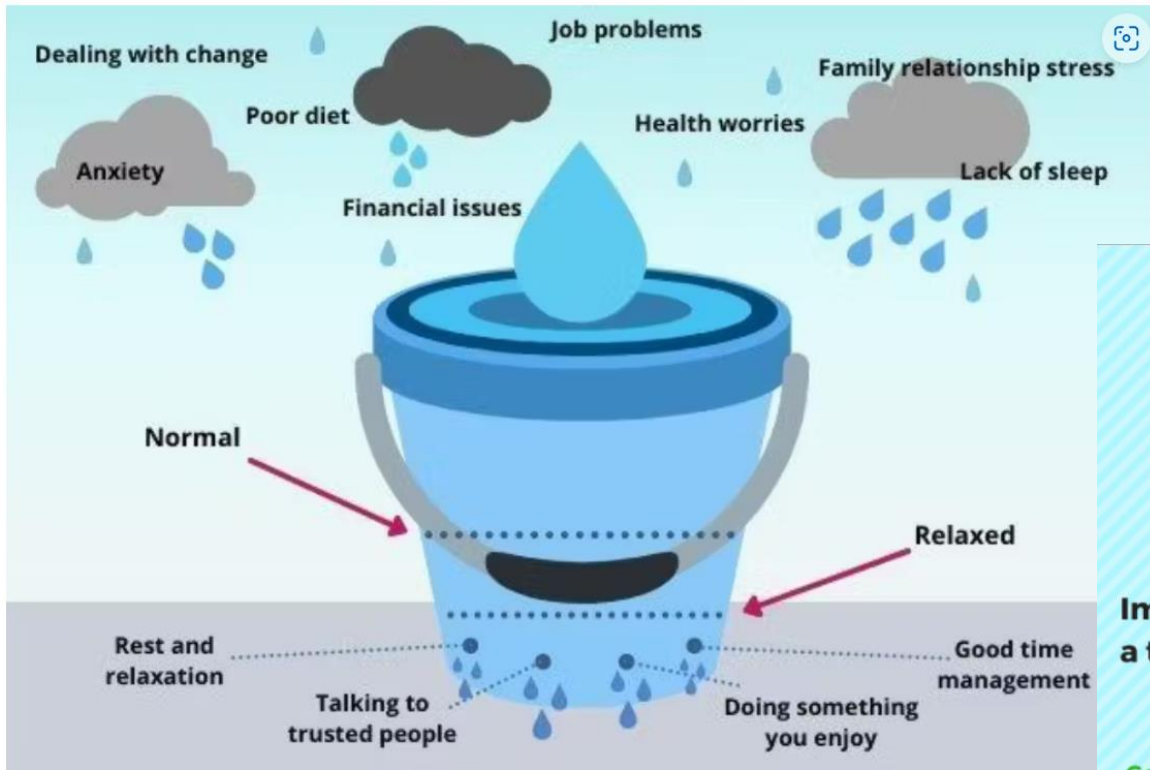
Parent Well Being

- You will need to touch on parent well-being too

- You may wish to facilitate a discussion about how they feel they are coping and what they do to manage their own stress bucket

- You could do a relaxation session or a One Minute Body Scan in your session

- Signpost parents to other services if need be

- I suggest asking parents to think about anxiety in their own children but also in themselves; can they recognise some of   these symptoms? Did they have school based difficulties too?

- Opening up a discussion around this could lead to parents / carers processing their own emotions related to school

- It is incredibly upsetting seeing their child anxious and fearful and we need to empathise with this

- However, we also need to encourage them to develop strategies that will help their child build resilience etc

- That said, for some children and young people, school is just not a good fit (this is rare though)

Signposting

- Where to signpost parents / carers to, over and above what schools can offer

- Young Minds https://www.youngminds.org.uk/

- Anna Freud

- Kooth

- BBC Bitesize https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/zdkn3qt?utm_source=google&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=refusal

- Not Fine in School https://notfineinschool.co.uk/

- Square Peg

- Derby and Derbyshire Emotional Wellbeing website

- EBSNA Resources for Parents (padlet.com) loads of resources for parents to use at home
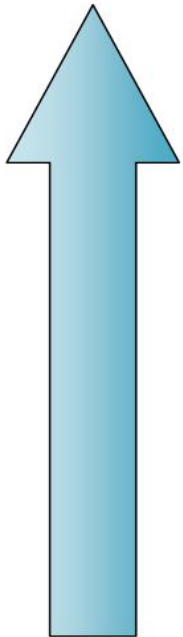
Graded Exposure Plans

Anxiety ladder: This is helpful for pupils not able to access the school at all, or the classroom, i.e. in a hub or attending on a reduced timetable

Most worried about

⬆

Not so worried about

Going into a busy dining room

Going into an empty dining room

Speaking to a peer

Going into a lesson (maths)

Seeing peers around school

Going into an empty classroom

Going into the reception area

Meeting a member of staff in the car park

Putting on uniform in the home

Most worried about

Least worried about

Protective factors- what helps children attend?

Share this with Parents

- A good sleep routine, diet, exercise and fresh air, boundaries linked to technology

- A sense of belonging in school- friends, clubs

- Having at least one person in school that they trust and who has their back

- Parents talking positively about school and valuing education

- Having emotional self-awareness and self-regulation skills

- Reasonable adjustments being made by school staff

How to build resilience

- Developing ambition, aspiration and motivation- what do they love?
- Increasing confidence, self-esteem, self-efficacy, value in themselves
- Developing feelings of safety, security and a sense of belonging- FOMO is real
- Having positive experiences where they can succeed
- Holding positive relationships with peers or staff- this is a hugely important factor to CYP
- Feeling listened to and understood by staff
- Understanding the relationship between thoughts, feelings and behaviour
- Willingness to work in partnership between school, family and external professionals
- Developing skills and understanding
- Flexibility of approaches within school, person centred and listening to the voice of the child

Taken from West Sussex School Avoidance guidance

What to expect from schools

- Emphasis on being proactive and preventative, speak to school before things are really tough

- Reassure that you monitor and track at risk groups, and watch for patterns in non-attendance to try and intervene early

- Go through your own attendance policy, referring to the graduated response for EBSNA

- Share the ATTEND framework and how it works- explaining that only a few will need this depth of work

- Ultimately, we want parents to trust that you understand their concerns and have the knowledge and resolve to work with them

Expectations for Settings – DfE Guidance

- Remove in school barriers, including reasonable adjustments and adaptations for uniform, transport, routines, lunchtime arrangements, and access to support in school

- Joined up pastoral care in place, including making a phased return to school plan at the CYP's pace

- Keep track, monitoring and sharing data about these groups with the local authority

School Based Factors

Make a commitment to connection and belonging e.g. spend additional time welcoming back, video calls prior to transition, special jobs and responsibilities

Provision of a secondary attachment figure - someone the CYP can build a trusted relationship with over time at school

RAG (Red Amber Green) the school environment to review hotspots and areas requiring support, as well as areas that feel more manageable

Targeted support to reduce areas of particularly **high anxiety** e.g. 'meet and greet', peers to walk to school with

Support to **identify positive aspects of school** (e.g. favoured lessons/ teachers) which could provide basis for return

A **'safe space' to escape to** when feeling overwhelmed and access to **'calming toolkits'** to aid regulation

Complete a **friendship audit** to review pre-existing friendships as well as friendship opportunities (e.g. Sociograms)

Practical support to develop friendships e.g. Circle of Friends, Buddy systems, lunchtime clubs and structured group activities

Access to **catch up tutoring and pre-teaching** (online or face-to-face) so that the child feels more confident re-entering the classroom

Support the CYP to **prepare a script** that they can use when other children ask them why they have not been attending school

INCLUSION PARTNERSHIP

DERBY CITY PEIA ATTENDANCE

DERBY CITY SECONDARY HEADS · PSG PRIMARY STRATEGY GROUP · DERBY COUNTY COMMUNITY TRUST · Derby City Council · DERBY DIRECTION

Support for pupils with medical conditions or SEND with poor attendance

Parents are expected to:	Schools are expected to:	Academy trustees and governing bodies are expected to:	Local authorities are expected to:
Work with the school and local authority to help them understand their child's barriers to attendance. Proactively engage with the support offered.	Maintain the same ambition for attendance and work with pupils and parents to maximise attendance. Ensure join up with pastoral support and where required, put in place additional support and adjustments, such as an individual healthcare plan and if applicable, ensuring the provision outlined in the pupil's EHCP is accessed. Consider additional support from wider services and external partners, making timely referrals. Regularly monitor data for such groups, including at board and governing body meetings and with local authorities.	Regularly review attendance data and help school leaders focus support on the pupils who need it.	Work closely with relevant services and partners, for example special educational needs, educational psychologists, and mental health services, to ensure joined up support for families. Ensure suitable education, such as alternative provision, is arranged for children of compulsory school age who because of health reasons would not otherwise receive a suitable education.

Whole school approaches

A considerable added bonus of taking a universal design approach to classroom supports is that undiagnosed pupils can also benefit – a range of techniques and practical supports are suggested in Johnson and Rutherford (2019). For example:

- Schools that have provided tablets and laptops to the whole school benefit those children who struggle to spell and write, without singling them out.
- Relaxing or scrapping school uniform policies supports pupils with sensory issues who cannot tolerate wearing the uniform.
- Lots of schools no longer sound a bell between classes, which generates a calmer atmosphere for all.

Other factors parents need to be aware of

The advice is clear that a reduced timetable should not be considered a long-term solution but rather as part of a reintegration package.

Any return to school plan should recognise that EBSNA is unique to each young person. There also needs to be recognition by those involved with the pupil that often there is no 'quick fix' to EBSNA.

A flexible approach that incorporates the views of all involved and most importantly, the views of the young person, is required.

Everyone, school staff and parents, need to share the expectation that the plan, once agreed, will work.

For some young people, who are working on a gradual reintegration package, it can be helpful to put together a step-by-step plan that gradually, over time, exposes them to the situations that are anxiety provoking. This gives the individual some control over the plan and hopefully helps them to feel more confident as each step is achieved.

Activity

- Discuss your own school's way of implementing the GR guidance around attendance for anxious pupils, including the ATTEND framework

This is what you will want to share with your parents

- Have you got a policy that captures the nuances of what you specifically do in your setting?
- If not, then I advise that you work on this as a priority

Feedback to share good practice

Suggested Outline of a Parent Session in School

1. Welcome and reassurance about your compassion and understanding for the difficulties they are facing- build rapport and trust

2. Define EBSNA and give some data, so they don't feel alone

3. Hear about their own experiences

4. Information about anxiety and its cycle, including body sensations, thoughts and behaviour

5. Push and pull factors generally

6. Reflection on anxiety within the family, and own potential family push / pull factors

7. How to respond to your child when they are feeling anxious

8. The importance of sleep, diet and exercise for child and parents

9. What to expect from your setting regarding support, incl ATTEND

10. Signposting including the EBSNA webinar I have done

Tools- see pack

- Anxiety- infographics for how anxiety manifests
- Anxiety cycle
- Stress bucket
- Keeping a diary to identify triggers / when things go well and not so well
- Psycho-education tools (Think Good Feel Good)
- Emotion coaching info sheet
- Time to worry idea
- Punctuating the day with regulating / calming / fun activities- give parents a chance to try these out
- My personal plan (problem solving tool)
- Anxiety Ladder

Parent / Carer Webinar

- Please share the webinar I have put together for parents and carers regarding EBSNA

- Some of it will reinforce the message you will have shared, plus provide a bank of resources for them to use at home with their children

Signposting for you

- West Sussex guidance is great and has a whole school audit tool to make sure you are covering all bases, and support plan template

- EBSA_Guidance_Document_Updated_2022_(1).pdf (nationbuilder.com)