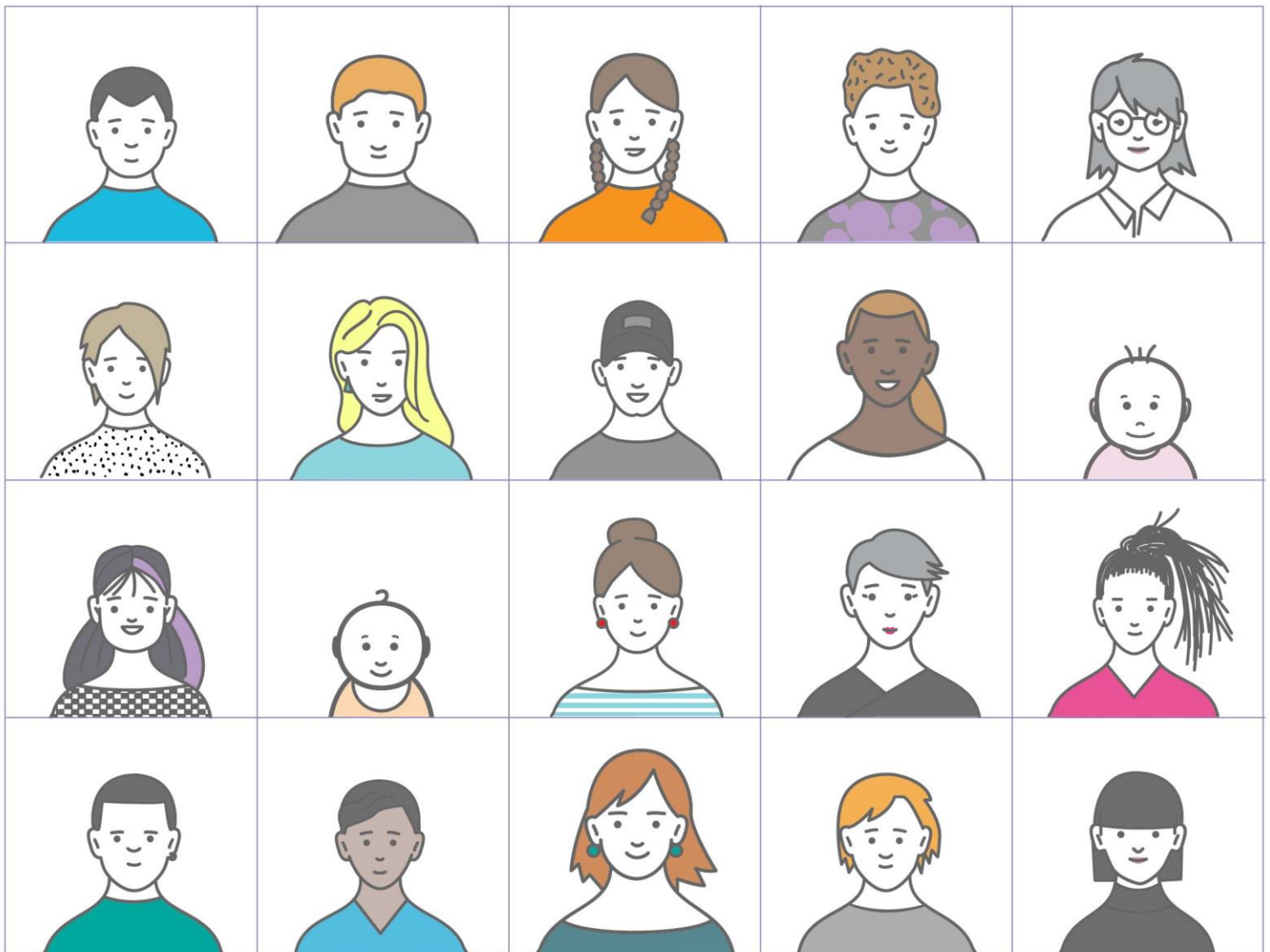




**A Practitioner's Guide for  
Responding to Emotionally Based School Absence (EBSA) in East  
Renfrewshire**



**HEALTHIER MINDS**



# Healthier Minds: A Practitioner’s Guide for Responding to Emotionally Based School Absence (EBSA) in East Renfrewshire

Chris Atherton (*Senior Educational Psychologist, East Renfrewshire Educational Psychology Service*)  
Angela Merrylees-Stalker (*Healthier Minds Principal Teacher*)

## Introduction

Emotionally Based School Absence . . . . .	2
Contributing Factors . . . . .	4

## Part One: Whole School Prevention and Support

A Relationship Based Approach . . . . .	5
Transitions . . . . .	7
Recording, Monitoring and Responding . . . . .	9

## Part Two: Individualised Support

Holistic Assessment and Information Gathering . . . . .	11
Outcome Focused Planning. . . . .	14
Support Strategies and Interventions . . . . .	15
Trauma Informed, Enhanced Nurturing Approaches . . . . .	17
Social Communication and Autism Spectrum Conditions . . . . .	17
Graded Exposure . . . . .	18
Advice for Children, Young People and Parents / Carers . . . . .	22
Requesting Assistance from Other Agencies . . . . .	24

## Appendices

## References

# Introduction

Engagement in learning is vital for all children and young people to reach their potential. Attendance is fundamental to learner engagement, and a key predictor of achievement, attainment and positive wellbeing outcomes (Heyne, et al., 2019). Promoting attendance is therefore an essential aim for school practitioners seeking to ensure all children and young people are included, engaged and involved.

This guidance aims to help East Renfrewshire practitioners working with children and young people who find it difficult to attend school. It identifies the key factors that contribute to high levels of attendance and how to respond to emotionally-based absence. It considers whole school and community factors that impact on attendance and engagement, and advice on how to support individuals where school absence has become problematic. To ensure the highest standards of practice in this area, this guidance should be considered alongside [Standard Circular 5](#) and relevant policy drivers such as [Included Engaged and Involved Part One](#) and [Compassionate Connected Communities](#).



## Emotionally Based School Absence

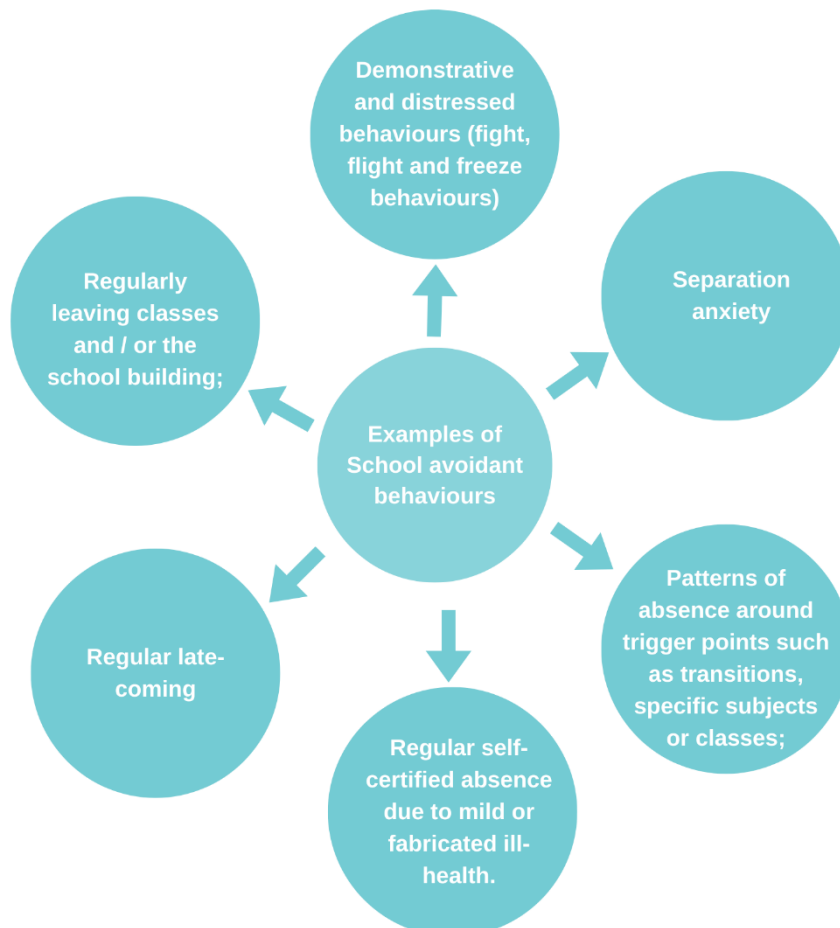
Every episode of school absence carries a risk to the fulfilment of a learner's potential (Havik, 2019). Problematic school absence is a long-standing issue within education (Lachlan, 2003) and will be seen in every area of our community for a wide range of reasons. In some cases, practitioners may encounter intergenerational patterns where families and communities feel less connected to education and school life (Kearney, 2021). In others, practitioners may find that emotional and mental wellbeing or neurodiversity lie at the heart of the challenge, and school doesn't feel like a safe, secure and nurturing place to be. Whatever the reason, the evidence suggests that the pandemic has created greater vulnerability and risk for children, young

people and families who are faced with these challenges (Phelps & Sperry, 2022). Many of these behaviours, whilst concerning, are often addressed effectively by schools through routine monitoring and support procedures. However in some cases, they can develop into severe and prolonged periods of absence that become problematic. There is inconsistency in how problematic absence is defined within the literature, as the behaviours are varied and the reasons behind them are complex (Gallé-Tessonneau et al., 2019; Childs & Lofton, 2021) (Appendix A). That said, there is now widespread recognition that almost all problematic absence is driven by a person's emotional wellbeing (Kearney & Graczyk, 2020; Rae, 2020)

### What does it look like?

School avoidant behaviours are common in children and young people, but can look very different (Havik, 2019; Rae, 2020).

Figure One: Examples of School Avoidant Behaviours



Understanding problematic school absence as a symptom of an emotional wellbeing need makes it possible to focus on:

- Risk and resilience factors;
- Reasons for the non-attendance;
- Specific practices and tools for assessment;
- Robust planning and effective prevention and response strategies.

These will all help practitioners manage this highly complex and challenging area of educational practice (Rae, 2020).

In East Renfrewshire, we will use the term **Emotionally Based School Absence (EBSA)**, defined as:

A pattern of behaviour indicating that a child or young person is not attending or fully engaging with school due to underlying emotional reasons. These reasons can be due to factors within and out-with the school environment, often a combination of both, and may manifest infrequently and frequently over the short or long-term.

This definition encourages a balanced, careful assessment of the interaction between the environmental conditions and relationships we create for children and young people, as well as the decisions they make because of their school experience.

Emotionally Based School Absence (ESBA) is understood as the way in which a child or young person communicates that their underlying emotions and level of connectedness are not supporting their school engagement and attendance (Albano & Kearney, 2018). Where EBSA becomes frequent and sustained over time, it can have

a detrimental impact on the child or young person's social and emotional development, as well as their learning (Aqeel & Renna, 2021).

This is closely associated with poorer outcomes, including:

- Lower levels of attainment;
- Relationship difficulties;
- Difficulty mastering emotions in challenging situations;
- Difficulty sustaining positive destinations such as further education, employment or training;
- Increased likelihood of poor mental health and wellbeing;
- Increased risk of offending behaviour;
- Reinforcement of intergenerational cycles of low expectation, engagement and attendance;
- Increased risk of socio-economic deprivation;
- Anxiety for parents / carers and siblings, causing tension, arguments and relationship challenges within the family.

Practitioners can also feel worried and at times burdened by their responsibility to try to improve the situation. By developing a good understanding of the risk factors that contribute to EBSA, practitioners can improve their preventative and responsive practice with confidence.

## Contributing Factors in EBSA

EBSA has many contributing factors arising from a variety of contextual circumstances (Lee et al., 2019; Lomholt et al., 2020). However there are some patterns, which are worth considering where children and young people may be more vulnerable. Figure one shows some of the individual, family/community and school factors that may be present:

Figure Two: Contributing risk factors for EBSA

(Adapted from Albano & Kearney, 2018; Rae, 2020 & West Sussex Council, 2021)

Individual	Family / Community	School
Young person's mental health	Parental ill health	Lack of relational, nurturing approaches and restorative practices at a whole system level
Anxiety	Poverty or financial insecurity	A culture where behaviour is managed through rewards and sanctions
Low Mood	Parental/ carer concerns about their child's safety during the school day e.g. bullying	Limited staff understanding of additional support needs e.g. neurodiversity, mental health and the impact of early trauma
Neurodevelopmental differences such as Autism Spectrum Condition, Dyslexia or significant learning needs	Relationship difficulties at home	A variety of approaches across departments which ranges in the level of consistency
Emotional lability	A culture where school attendance is not highly valued	Varied approaches to transition and change
Physical illness	Intergenerational school absence	Varied engagement with parents and carers
Difficulties with peer relationships	Disruption to family life e.g. parental separation or bereavement of a family member	Lack of flexibility around the school day, week and year
Difficulties with staff relationships	Presence of adverse childhood experiences or trauma for either the child or parent or both	Limited communication to staff around the needs of a young person who finds it challenging to come to school
Age and stage of development e.g. 5-6 years, 12-13 years	Presence of adverse childhood experiences or trauma Efforts to hide forms of abuse for either the child or parent or both	Limited focus on the crucial nature of transitions in a child or young person's life

# Part One: Whole School Prevention and Support

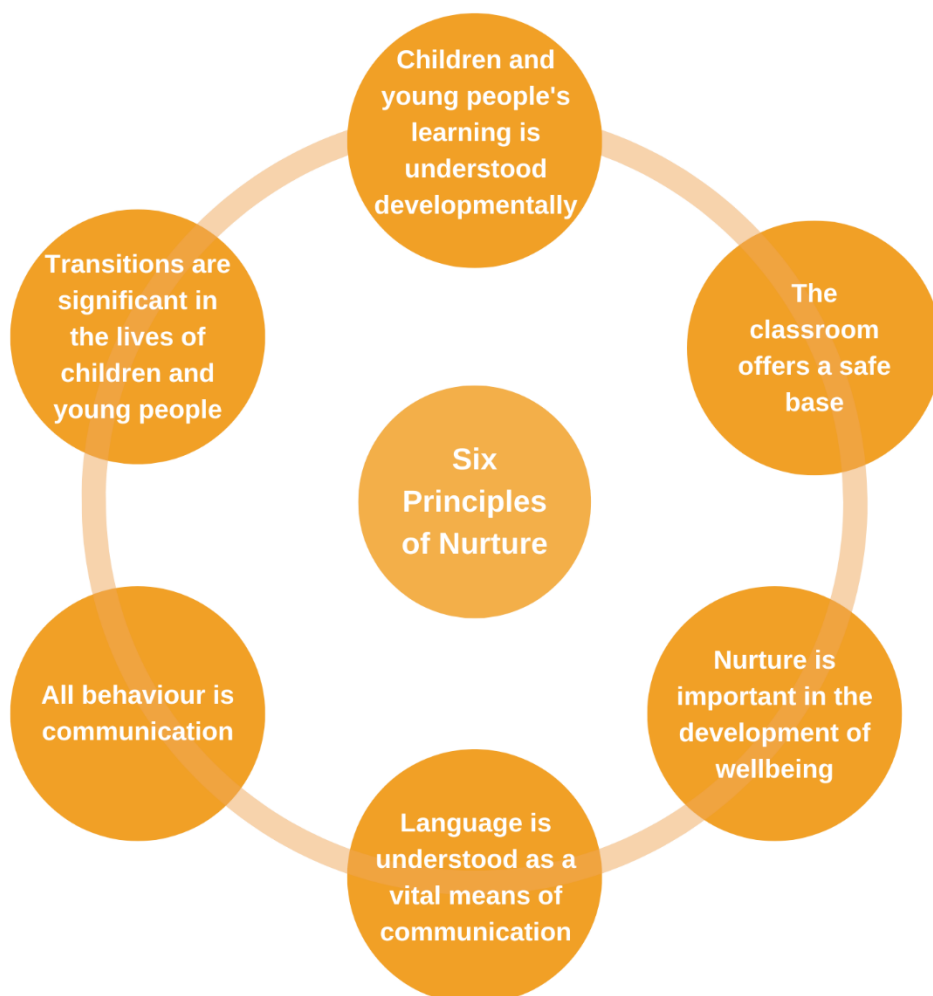
## A Relationship Based Approach

Attendance in East Renfrewshire schools is amongst the highest in Scotland. However, EBSA is present in every school community and often impacts on our most vulnerable children and young people. Effective prevention and support begins with an inclusive, nurturing, relationships-based ethos within the school, that every staff member embraces (Golding, Phillips & Bombèr, 2021). Where this exists, children and young people's relationships with staff and peers become a protective factor and they will feel safe, secure and connected to school life.

This will minimise many school-based risk factors. Children and young people who feel connected to school or have a sense of being wanted will be more likely to try to attend and engage in their learning (Bowles & Scull, 2018).

A relational, nurturing approach is most powerful where all practitioners are committed to understanding, supporting and addressing the environmental and psychological factors that contribute to children and young people's learning, development and connectedness. Successful outcomes are more likely where expectations are high, staff persevere and young people know they have someone who can support and believe in them. From classroom to corridor, practitioners need to understand and consistently apply the six principles of nurture:

Figure Three: The Six Principles of Nurture for Children and Young People (Nurture UK, 2022)



Effective school leadership is essential in developing an ethos where practitioners create a whole school nurturing environment. Using nurturing approaches shifts the focus from the individual behaviour of the young person, to understanding them on a developmental and emotional level. Nurturing practice also supports the premise that there will be reasons behind the young person's school absence. It enhances the crucial nature of a relational approach to build trust and help a young person feel safe and secure in the school environment.

The following challenge questions can be used to help improve a whole school approach:  
**Figure Four: Challenge Questions for a Whole School Approach**



Children and young people will have better wellbeing where they are taught about emotional literacy and resilience development. Schools that offer a wide range of curricular experiences in these areas will have improved outcomes, especially where these are informed by the needs of the local community.



## Transitions

Many children and young people need opportunities to learn and talk about the skills that build resilience, specifically:

- Emotional regulation;
- Impulse control;
- The ability to reach out for help when it is needed;
- The capacity to focus on activities that they are good at for their own self-efficacy;
- Having realistic optimism about the future;
- Good causal analysis when things go wrong, and;
- Knowing how to resolve or recover from challenges.

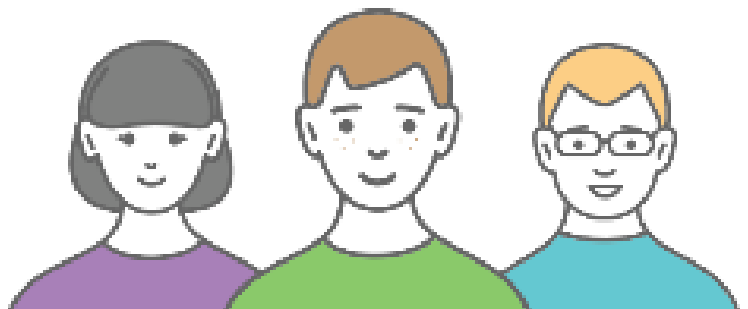
(Reivich and Shatte, 2003)

There are many local examples of good practice that support this type of work in Appendix B.

Participation in wider school life through extra-curricular activities and school events can also offer children, young people and parents / carers experiences that create a culture of connectedness to the school, particularly where these are tailored to involve harder to reach families. Creativity and community engagement in this area can improve and strengthen home-school relationships.

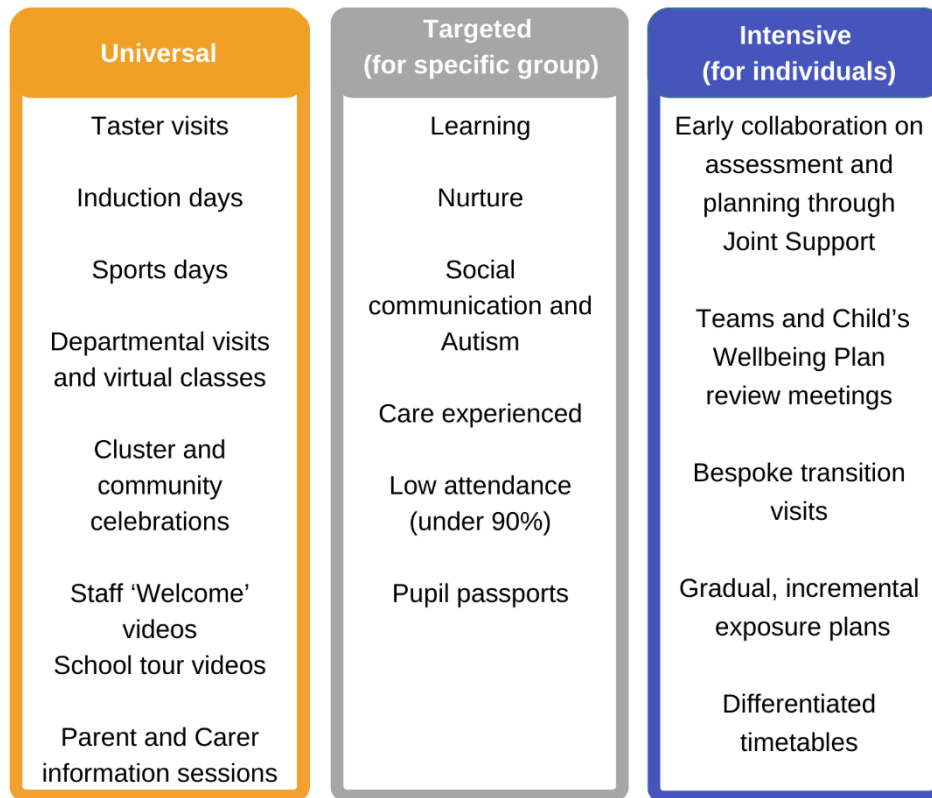
Transitions are important in the lives of children and young people (NurtureUK, 2022) and a key focus for early learning and child care centres (ELCCs) and schools. Children and young people may experience many different types of transition, for example through:

- Care experience;
- Family separation;
- Loss and bereavement;
- Moving home;
- Peer relationships;
- Changes of school;
- Changes of class or teacher;
- Changes within the school environment (e.g. arrival and departure, between classes, around breaks and lunches, changes of staff etc.);
- Changes in what is expected of them;
- Traumatic experiences.



In East Renfrewshire, there are high standards of practice in supporting transitions, and these are enhanced by targeted support for those with additional needs. Attendance and indicators of EBSA should be considered when schools are identifying those who will benefit from enhanced transition, as these are critical points of vulnerability for those who have lower connectedness to school and education.

Figure Five: Examples of good practice in supporting transitions



Low attendance and engagement with education can often be identified in the early years. Low participation or irregular attendance can be a sign that a child and their family are in need of support, perhaps around routines at home, separation anxiety or emergent additional support needs. Some families may benefit from additional support to understand how the experiences that our ELCCs provide can help their children to learn and develop.

Across all sectors, early communication with families is key to ensuring that children and young people are attending. In most cases, building relationships with a family will start at the beginning of a young person's journey with an establishment.

However, for some it may be important to start this process long before they enter the school building. By encouraging parental involvement and connectedness across all levels of education, and targeting the most vulnerable around transition points, practitioners can forge stronger relationships with parents and carers, and begin to address any negative associations they may have from their own school experience.

More information on transitions can be on the [Meeting Learner Needs](#) and [Healthier Minds](#) websites.

## Recording, Monitoring and Responding

### Recording

Standard Circular 5 outlines our local authority recording procedures, and thresholds where particular actions are necessary, such as when formal letters may need to be sent to families. These formal procedures are necessary as some families will need to be reminded of their legal obligations, the schools' level of concern and the negative impact absence can have. [Included, engaged and involved part 1: promoting and managing school absence](#), provides advice on how to consistently classify and record attendance and absence.

### Monitoring

Analysis of attendance data prior to the covid pandemic indicated that young people with additional support needs, those in receipt of free school meals, those with care experience, and those from SIMD 1-3, were likely to have lower attendance, with many of the most significant EBSA cases featuring these risk factors. Given the explicit links between attendance and attainment, it is clear to see that this area is fundamentally important in addressing the poverty related attainment and wellbeing gap.

Schools should use their attendance data to develop a rich understanding of the unique challenges they are facing within their local community. Whole school, class and individual attendance data can be used to identify patterns of absence across a school

day, week or year. Regular analysis will help practitioners to understand the possible causes of EBSA for individuals and groups of vulnerable learners in their school and ensure they are evidence-informed in their response.

### Responding

Developing effective investigation and response procedures at set thresholds (for example under 95% attendance, under 90%, or at points of transition) is an extremely effective way of maintaining high attendance standards, and identifying and supporting vulnerable children, young people and families at an early point in time, before associated EBSA challenges become significant and more resistant to change.

Depending on the size and circumstances of the school, having a dedicated practitioner who has oversight of this area can help ensure consistency, early communication and, critically, early intervention. Early communication with parents and carers is advised in order that everyone involved in the child or young person's life is able to understand why school absence is a concern and how it can be best supported.

Effective communication and information sharing about the impact of low attendance can also help establish a positive culture around attendance in school communities. Examples of attendance thresholds, including the related number of daily absences, and how this translates to lessons missed in a secondary school context, are shown in Figure Three

Figure Six: Attendance thresholds and associated days absence across the school year:

### Attendance

This table shows that a young person with an attendance rate of 70% in June has been absent for 57 days; this is the equivalent of 376 lessons. An attendance rate this low would make it extremely difficult for a young person to achieve their academic potential.

Attendance from Aug to the end of June.	Actual Number of School Days Missed	Approximate Number of Lessons Missed
95%	9	59
90%	19	125
85%	28	185
80%	38	251
75%	47	310
70%	57	376

One of our local high schools distributed individualised attendance statement letters and leaflets to all pupils, referencing this data, and with a **positive focus** on the impact that any improvement might have on the young person (Appendix C).



## Part Two: Individualised Support

Early assessment and response for individual EBSA cases is crucial as evidence suggests that after two weeks the challenges become more difficult to address (Albano & Kearney, 2018). A negative cycle develops that becomes more entrenched with time and more difficult to change. Where EBSA is identified, practitioners should create a Child's Wellbeing Plan (Education) and follow East Renfrewshire's staged intervention guidance, using the GIRFEC practice model (See [Meeting Learner Needs](#) site for further information).

Ensuring that every child and young person has at least one key adult in their school life who demonstrates unconditional positivity towards them, even when they are struggling, is a key feature of successfully supporting those who are vulnerable to EBSA. It is important that key adults provide regular, open and supportive communication with the young person and the parents / carers from the outset in order to develop a robust, collaborative assessment and support plan. In larger schools there may be more than one key adult.

EBSA indicates that an emotional wellbeing need has arisen because the child or young person is experiencing challenges. Ongoing person centred assessment is necessary to understand these challenges, and all the factors that are specifically affecting each individual, looking at their key relationships and their experience within and out-with school.

### Holistic Assessment and Information Gathering

In the very early stages, where EBSA is emerging, daily monitoring and checking-in with parents / carers is best. They are often able to manage these situations themselves, so supporting them to feel empowered is very

important. Simple adaptations can still be considered early on by practitioners to alleviate stressors that will undermine the parents' / carers' efforts to improve attendance, for example by:

- Making sure they are not challenged for timekeeping or uniform policy compliance;
- Removing deadlines for homework and upcoming assessments where possible;
- Making sure everyone who works with them is aware that they are finding things difficult;
- Being mindful and taking account of their vulnerability when responding to low and moderate levels of emotionally driven challenging behaviour.

Initiating contact and developing a relationship with the parents / carers is critical. Creating an alliance based on honesty, empathy and respect will help in times ahead if things get particularly stressful. If the parent / carer is struggling and or feeling judged or blamed, the possibility of 'splitting' between home and school is strengthened (they blame the school, the school blame them – the stalemate in which everyone loses, especially the young person). Therefore supporting parents and the young person to engage with the assessment and plan, and with relevant appointments with school and multi-agency partners, is extremely helpful.

In the process of assessment, a particular focus on the areas outlined in Figure Four, taking account of the child or young person's views and needs in these areas, will be a useful starting point for developing an effective support plan:

Figure Seven: Assessment areas for information gathering with young people and their families impacted by EBSA

DEVELOPMENTAL	RELATIONAL	INTERACTIONAL	FUNCTIONAL	TARGETED
<p>Acquiring a good understanding of the young person's growth and development e.g. their journey with their family, their friends, their experience of educational environments, and any additional support needs arising from developmental or neurodevelopmental differences that they may have (e.g. physical, sensory, social communication, learning differences etc.)</p>	<p>Examining relationships the child / young person has with peers and adults at home and in the school, and also the relationship between parents /carers and key members of school staff</p>	<p>Acknowledging that factors which can be considered within-child (e.g. anxiety, low mood, social communication differences) only become problematic as a result of the individuals' experience of their environment and their interactions within that – e.g. through people, subjects, places and rules / expectations</p>	<p>Developing a more forensic understanding of what is strengthening the EBSA behaviour(s) and what is weakening the desire to attend school (the push and pull factors)</p>	<p>Holistic wellbeing assessment that is ecological and contextual, taking account of home, school and community factors, leads to clear targetted actions that minimise risks and maximise opportunities to change the course of the child / young person's journey</p>

Prompt questions can help practitioners to build an accurate picture for an individual's circumstances.

Figure Eight: Prompt Questions for Practitioners



As effective intervention is critical in EBSA cases and in line with a staged intervention approach, practitioners should begin the process of assessment by carefully considering what can be done at a school level before looking outwardly to other services and agencies. EBSA cases require monitoring and support on a daily basis, and the capacity for change and improvement exists most prevalently within the core relationships that are developed between the child, their family and key practitioners within school.

After gathering all appropriate background information to understand the child or young person's world, it is often helpful to develop a more detailed understanding of the **function of their EBSA behaviour**. The School Refusal Assessment Scales (Albano & Kearney, 2008) have been adapted by East Renfrewshire Educational Psychology Service to reflect developing terminology (with permission from author Chris Kearney) to support practitioners with this activity:

[The EBSA Assessment for Children and Young People \(Appendix D\)](#)

[The EBSA Assessment for Parents and Carers \(Appendix E\)](#)

They are relatively quick to complete and can support practitioners to understand **why** a young person is not attending school. They give an indicative score across four main areas to help practitioners identify which reason or 'function' is most dominant in the case of each young person.

The functions are:

1. To avoid school-related objects and situations (stimuli) that provoke negative affectivity (symptoms of dread, anxiety, depression, and somatic complaints)
2. To escape aversive social and or evaluative situations at school
3. To receive or pursue attention from significant others outside of school
4. To pursue tangible rewards outside of school

Once scored, this assessment is a useful starting point to find out if the young person is avoiding something school specific, or being pulled towards home where life may be a lot easier or more important than coming into the school building. This can then be discussed with the young person and their parents / carers to ensure ongoing, open communication and can be the starting point for individualised outcome focussed planning that is suitably specific to the nature of the problem.

The Questions for Families and School document (QFS) (Appendix F) can also be helpful in assessing the young person's previous experience across family and school to date. It is useful to have these details to help inform next steps. The QFS can be also be used with practitioners who may be involved in supporting the young person e.g. the Educational Psychologist or Social Worker.

Children and young people who experience EBSA should be discussed at the school Joint Support Team Meeting (JST). Information and advice around EBSA assessment, support and intervention can be sought through this forum. Some cases will require the involvement of other agencies, particularly if there is a need for enhanced emotional wellbeing support, if there are unidentified barriers to learning and development, or if there are concerns around parental support needs.

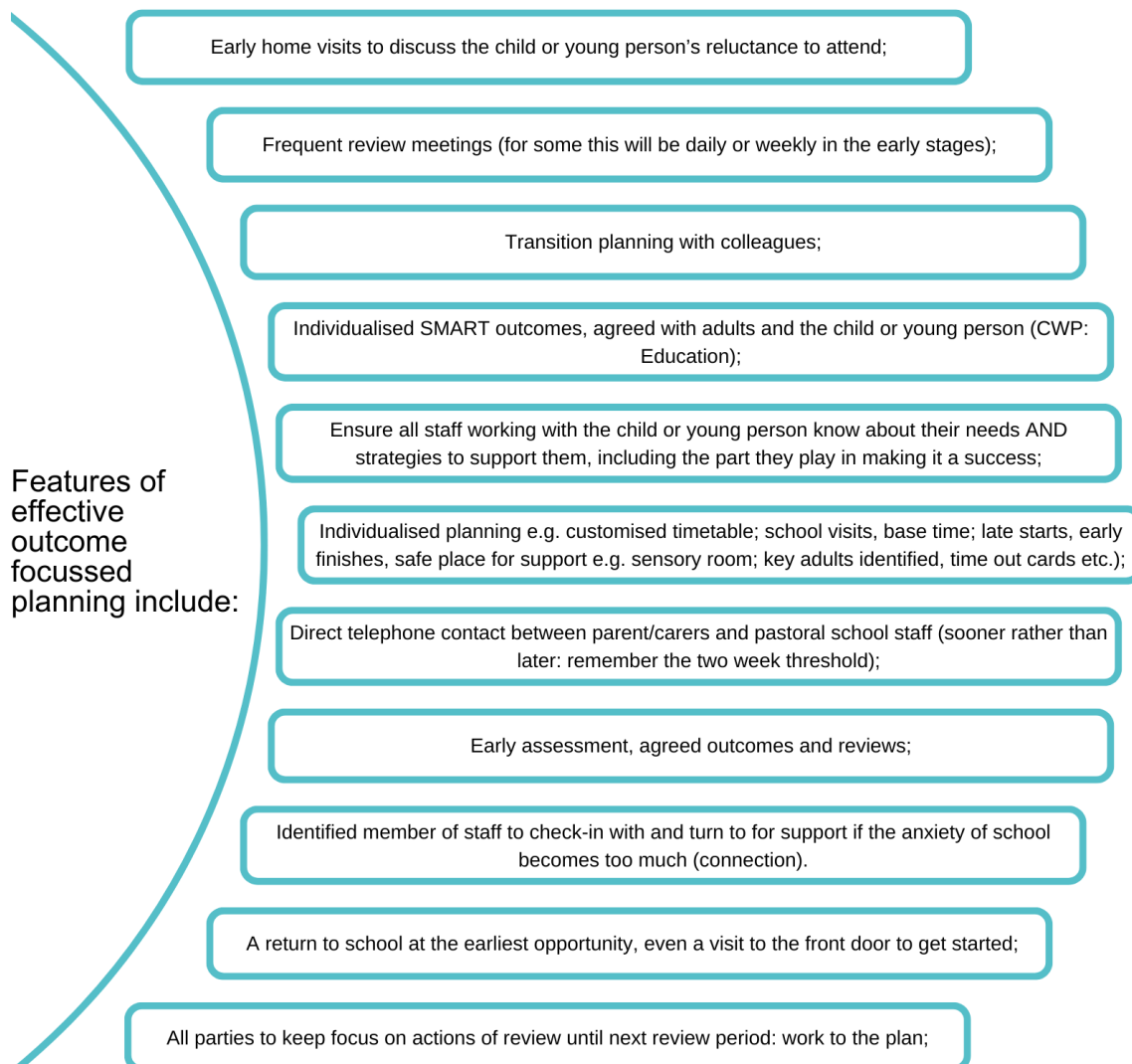
Finally, the young person's voice in the process of assessment and planning is crucial. The more consensus there is about where the challenges arise and what needs to be done, the more likely it is that the EBSA will be addressed successfully. In many EBSA cases, the young person will be experiencing a perceived lack of control and anxiety, so the more agency they experience and the more they feel like an equal partner in the plan, the less anxious they are likely to be, and all the more committed. This does not mean doing exactly as the young person says, but rather allowing them to explain their worries and supporting them, slowly and gradually, towards success. (West Sussex Council, 2021).

## Outcome Focused Planning

Once there is a good understanding of **why** a child or young person is not attending school, specific achievable outcomes and actions should be agreed by everyone involved to support a return to school. Often the first goal is to stabilise the situation to avoid it worsening. The return often needs to be gradual and stepped, as a 'quick fix' is not always possible. An example of a stepped approach to planning is shown on p.26, Figure Seven.

Implementing the plan can be difficult and is to be anticipated. Maintaining a solution-focussed stance will allow for small successes to be recognised and other options to emerge should there be bumps in the road at any point. Views may differ as to what is a priority, so practitioners need to be ready for negotiation and collaboration with the young person and their family.

Figure Nine: Features of Effective Outcome Focussed Planning (West Sussex Council, adapted, 2021)





Each situation will be different and will require a tailored response. This is part of the challenge with EBSA, as every young person requires something a *little* bit different and a *big* bit customised. As a practitioner, being resilient and persistent is key at this stage.

An overview of key points for the planning process are detailed in Figure Five.

Figure Ten: Considerations for planning a return to school



## Support Strategies and Intervention

For practitioners who are leading the response to individual cases, it is important to ensure their approach is encouraging consistent engagement in school life, minimising factors that pull the young person away from their learning, and developing the child or young person's resilience. Successful outcomes are underpinned where children and young people feel listened to and understood, and where they are supported to:

- Develop their ambition, aspiration and motivation;
- Increase their confidence, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and value in themselves;
- Develop feelings of safety, security and a sense of belonging within the school;
- Have positive experiences where they can succeed;
- Develop positive relationships with peers and / or staff;

- Understand the relationship between their thoughts, feelings and behaviour;
  - Work in partnership with their family, the school and external professionals;
  - Develop a sense of direction and purpose in their education, with a clear end goal in sight, such as training or employment in a preferred area.
- (West Sussex council (adapted), 2021)

Practitioners have the most control and influence over the child or young person's school experience. The school experience often needs to be adapted to become a better fit for individuals who are vulnerable to EBSA, one that promotes their strengths and resilience factors and minimises the risks. Successful outcomes are more likely where practitioners:

- Are empowered to be adaptable and flexible;
- Are solution focussed;
- Plan to reduce EBSA gradually over time;
- Promote individual attendance and engagement on the basis of pupil voice, their interests and strengths;
- Recognise small achievements and progress along the way;
- Identify some 'quick wins' that give the young person a sense of progress and achievement;
- Seek to improve the child or young person's whole school connectedness, looking specifically at their relationships and appropriate curricular experiences.

(O'Hagan, Bond & Hebron, 2022).

- Graded exposure to the building, staff, and timetable (see Figure Seven);
- Soft start to the day, particularly on a Monday and Friday – find a hook – something they might enjoy coming in for that will reward their transition into the building;
- Customised timetables for days/weeks and terms;
- Daily check-in with a member of the school team;
- Daily celebrations, however small, that acknowledge any success;
- A 1-2-1 session (potentially weekly) to discuss and review the plan for re-engagement with school and any other worries the young person may have;
- Walk & talk: getting alongside the young person either inside or outside the school building can be much more helpful than sitting in a formal environment or across a desk;
- Strategies for moving to a safe space, if needed;
- Robust transition planning and interventions;
- Adult contacts for the child or young person when they are in the building (especially at transitions);
- Individualised or group work to support emotional and mental wellbeing;
- Ongoing, regular communication with parents / carers.

School practitioners can offer individualised support in a number of ways. As a starting point, the following features will underpin a successful plan of action:

## Individualised Support for Emotional Wellbeing

In addition to customising the child or young person's experience at school and carefully considering expectations, demands and environmental changes that can be made, there will also be a need for emotional wellbeing support. The most natural and effective way to do this is by developing rapport and a positive relationship with the young person based on trust and openness. Most people rely on their relationships with those they are closest to, in order to recover from challenging situations, however for some, a more targeted individual response may be necessary. Intensi

If someone in the school is trained in therapeutic approaches (e.g. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)), it is worth considering direct work with the young person around their EBSA. Once the reasons for EBSA have been identified, therapeutic approaches may help the young person to understand: what is happening; why it is happening; and how they can help themselves on a daily basis when faced with anxiety-provoking situations around school attendance. Practitioners can use CBT based strategies in their conversations with the young person. Further guidance in this area can be found on the [Healthier Minds](#) website.

In some cases, outside agencies may be best placed to offer direct support depending on the nature and severity of the emotional wellbeing need, for example through the Healthier Minds Service or Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services.

## Trauma Informed, Enhanced Nurturing Approaches

All schools will have children and young people who would benefit from enhanced nurturing approaches. The need for targeted

or intensive support in this area often arises where children and young people have adverse childhood experiences or trauma.

Many significant life events can have a traumatic impact. They may be school related, for example a breakdown in their relationships or an incident that provokes feelings of shame and anxiety, or home related, for example as a result of change, loss, bereavement, or parental mental health. In some cases, children and young people may be experiencing neglect or abuse. If a practitioner has any concern around this, they should [follow the local authority child protection procedures and consult the child protection coordinator within the school.](#)

Understanding what is happening, or has happened in the young person's life, is really important. Practitioners can show they can be trusted by listening to them and building a relationship that will support them when things are tough. The [Healthier Minds guidance for practitioners](#) has advice on how to have supportive conversations when children and young people are talking about their mental wellbeing.

Giving young people dedicated places and time is also crucial. Many of our schools have either a wellbeing hub, a base or a nurture classroom provision. In some cases of EBSA, the use of environments like these might be a good place to work with the young person, especially for checking-in first thing in the morning. A separate, private space where they can connect with their trusted adults is very helpful. Practitioners will need to assess this and consult with the young person to establish if it is something that they would want, as some are resistant to any obvious supports that might mark them out as being different when they are in school.

Intensive support for EBSA is usually characterised by: a fully customised timetable

and curriculum; minimal, intensively supported

## Social Communication and Autism Spectrum Conditions

transitions between staff and through areas of the building; and the establishment of a truly secure base for the young person, with dedicated space and a core team of staff who can provide predictability and routine. Their subsequent learning experiences will often require tailoring to support their emotional and behavioural needs. Consultation and advice should be sought from the Joint Support Team where this level of intervention is required, but a good start is to focus on providing experiences that are:

**P**redictable  
**P**urposeful  
**P**leasureable

It is likely that some children and young people will experience difficulty regulating their emotions. This may result in them displaying distressed or dysregulated behaviours. For more information on safe de-escalatory working practices, see Appendix G.

Ultimately, the extent to which children and young people feel nurtured will depend on their experience of the adults that they work with on a daily basis. If practitioners can maintain a naturally playful, loving, affectionate, caring and empathic demeanour, as appropriate for the child or young person's age and stage, they are more likely to foster connectedness and feelings of safety, where children and young people know that they have people they can trust to support them.

Many children and young people in the school will have neuro-developmental differences that influence how they function in a social world that is shaped, for the most part, by people without such differences. Knowledge and understanding of the differing needs and requirements of autistic people has only recently begun to truly influence mainstream practice. Even so, the good baseline knowledge, understanding and experience of practitioners is not always shared by the wider population. Autistic people's experience is seldom kept in mind when, for example, school buildings, restaurants and shops are designed.

Autistic people often differ in how they communicate and interact socially when compared with non-autistic people. They may have strong interests or passions about specific activities or interests, and may enjoy routinised, repetitive experiences. Their preferred topics of conversation or their general social communication style may make it more difficult for them to establish friendships they can feel secure and calm in.

Autistic people often experience the sensory world differently, and can be either hyper or hypo-sensitive. Many autistic people will identify sensory triggers like the school bell, the canteen, and large, busy spaces, as quite triggering and difficult to cope with. This can be evident at major transitions such as entering or exiting the school building, break, lunch time, and changeovers between classes.

An inclusive, neurodiversity aware school will find that autistic children and young people are more likely to attend and engage in their learning. Whole school commitment to training in autism and neurodevelopmental differences is therefore critical, as the anxiety that this population of children and young people can experience is often routed in:

- sensory and environmental triggers
- their social communication experiences
- their relationships with peers and staff
- the inconsistencies they experience with respect to rules and expectations (even when these may appear subtle to others)
- multiple transitions

With this level of vulnerability and risk, all staff members must develop their skills in communicating with children and young people in an autism informed way. Some of the guiding principles of doing so include:

- Keeping things consistent by being predictable and routine based
- Using concrete visual cues and materials to support language and communication of ideas, expectations and plans
- Practitioners being specific and accurate in their use of language, and owning any communication errors that they make, which is highly likely given how prevalently most people use creative and idiomatic language in their daily communication
- Practitioners being aware that the content of what is said carries more weight than all other elements of verbal communication (e.g. speech prosody, volume, intonation, pitch, and non-verbal communication)
- Being aware that the issue of communication breakdown between neuro-typical and neuro-diverse individuals is one of a double empathy problem, it's not the individual with autism that has sole ownership of the problem
- Being aware that a person with autism will often have a base level of anxiety

that is much higher than most neuro-typically developing people, meaning they are more vulnerable to emotional dysregulation, emotional drain and shame if they are not coping on a regular basis

Autism can be thought of as a condition of extremes. Therefore, autistic people are much more vulnerable to the effects of school experiences that most people would find anxiety provoking to some extent, and also to some experiences that most people would find unproblematic. It stands to reason that, as a result, some will develop EBSA behaviours. Indeed in some cases, EBSA is an indicator of an underlying autistic profile that has been masked for some time by the young person, often at great emotional cost.

With such a varying profile of need and experience, autistic people need to be understood individually. Plans need to be tailored specifically in partnership with them to ensure they meet their needs and offer them the right learning experience. However, there are patterns within the autistic population that point to specific adaptations and strategies that are worth considering, many of which would also help children and young people with EBSA who are not autistic. More information on the features of effective support for those with autism can be found in Appendix H.

Where young people are experiencing acute anxiety, they are more likely to exhibit higher levels of rigidity, and this can develop into controlling behaviours. At times like this the child or young person is likely to feel that:

- The social world is *extremely* difficult to navigate
- Their attempts to communicate are misinterpreted by others
- Their attempts to understand the communication of others is failing

- Their system for navigating their social world is not working
- Their social world is a place where they are not safe, leading to fear, anxiety, and more stress
- They have few options to choose from, they are trapped, so the most effective action is sabotage – that way they are making a firm choice, and taking back some sense of control.

In these cases, practitioners may experience more success by using indirect prompts. These can help reduce feelings of anxiety over time, and minimise the risk of heightened emotional responses. Examples are detailed in Figure Six:

Figure Eleven: Indirect prompts to support EBSA



These strategies are likely to help anyone with anxiety, autistic or not. For some, their level of anxiety will be at such a height that a very detailed, progressive plan will be needed to support their gradual reintegration back into the school environment.

## Gradual Exposure Planning

Gradual or Graded Exposure (Wolpe, 1957), is a commonly used strategy to support people to overcome a range of difficulties, often anxiety-based. It involves a gradual move towards the task which is the hardest and is an effective strategy for EBSA as it supports children and young people to move slowly towards a school return. Individual steps need to be small, actions for the plan are ranked in terms of difficulty and timescales for success are built in. Plans for gradual exposure should be created in partnership with the family and team around the young person.

An example of a graded exposure approach is a *stepped approach* or an *exposure ladder*, where small steps are specified that to allow for success to be acknowledge and celebrated along the way. An example of a stepped-approach, using graded exposure, is shown in Figure Seven.

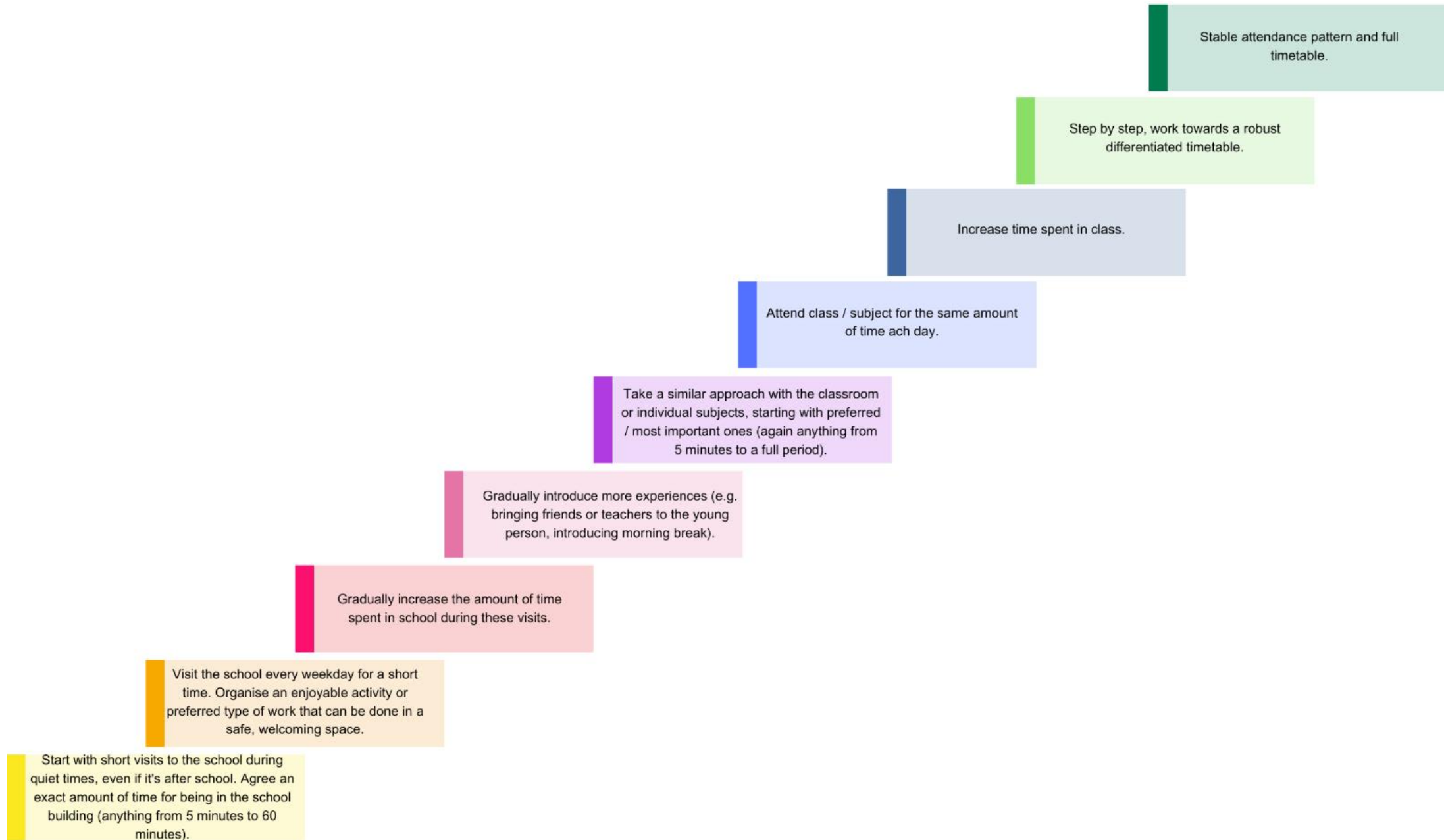
The key to the graded exposure plan is persistence and flexibility. Each success should be recorded and acknowledged. Setbacks are expected and part of the process, so resilience and tenacity from everyone around the young person is crucial. It is important to support the young person but equally important to challenge and push them to succeed in the next step of their journey. This is only possible if they have positive relationships with their key adult. Someone they can trust, who will be there to help them manage their anxieties throughout the process.

Children and young people need the security of knowing that a graded exposure plan will be followed accurately. It is therefore critically important that practitioners follow up on exactly what has been agreed, even if things seem to be going well. Changing expectations or agreed actions will only increase their anxiety and risk their disengagement. Effective communication and coordination is critical to ensure that all relevant people are informed and aware of the plan. This will increase the young person's chances of experiencing success. The Case Study in Appendix I gives an insight into what can be required for this strategy to be a success.



Figure Twelve: Graded Exposure - Simple Example

Goal





## Advice for Children, Young People and Parents/Carers

Practitioners cannot control all the factors that impact on EBSA, particularly where these exist out-with the school context, however they are still in a position of influence. Young people and parents / carers will often benefit from direct support and advice in managing the situation. Many of the factors and strategies that have been discussed herein can equally be considered and used by parents and carers at home. However, the [Healthier Minds Website](#) has further information and advice for parents.

## Requesting Assistance from Other Services and Agencies

It may be the case that the child or young person requires support from another agency or service. In most cases, and in line with a staged intervention approach, the first step towards accessing support from another service begins with referral to the school Joint Support Team, where the case can be discussed and considered alongside the referral criteria for each service and agency. For more information on what services might be able to offer support, visit the Healthier Minds website.

## Conclusion

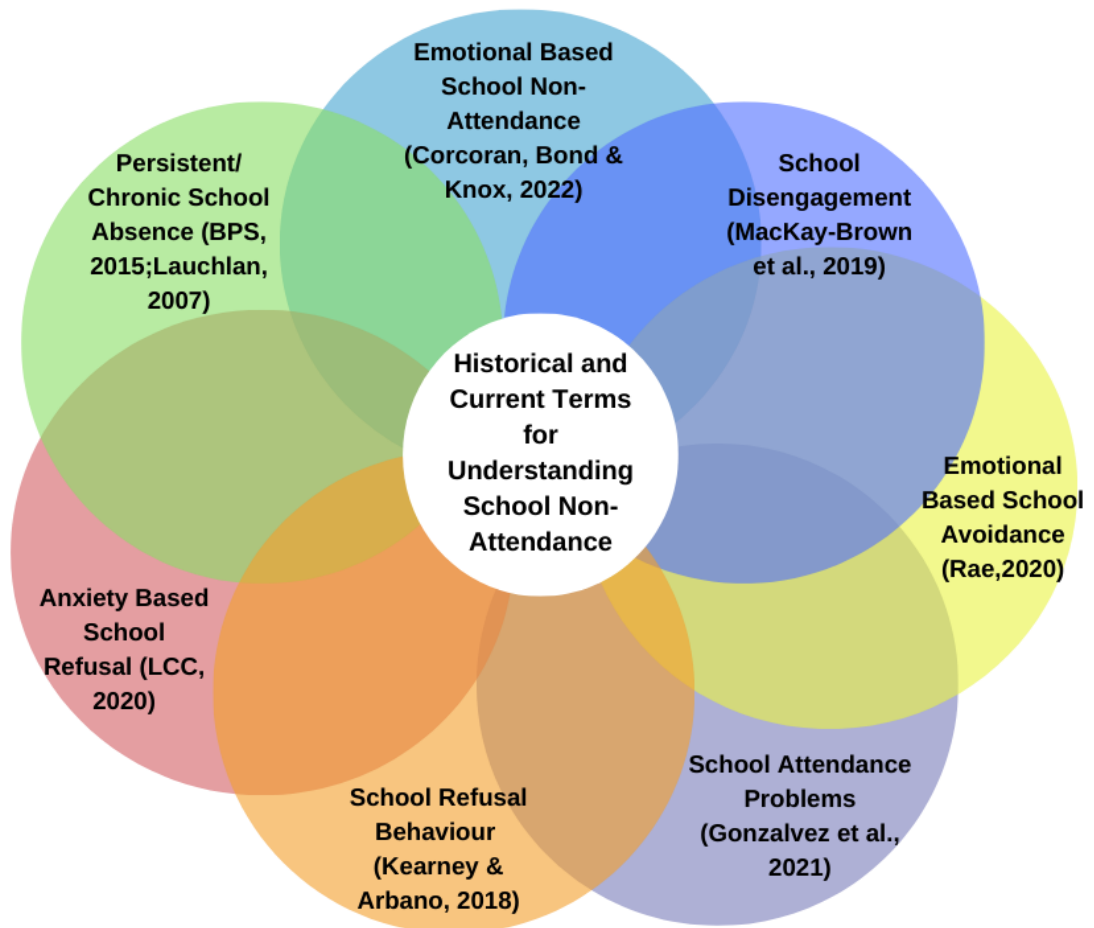
EBSA will exist in all schools, even those with an inclusive, relationships-based ethos. For this reason, practitioners need evidence-informed procedures for assessment, planning and intervention to support children and young people in an individualised, targeted way. Practitioners can use this guidance to ensure that their school is both proactive and responsive to the challenges that exist with EBSA. Where this guidance has been followed, practitioners can be confident in their practice and be assured that they are doing everything they can to support in an exceptionally challenging area of educational practice.

For further information about services that may be able to support with EBSA, and for guidance in supporting the mental wellbeing of young people, please visit the Healthier Minds Website: <https://blogs.glowscotland.org.uk/er/healthierminds/>



## Appendix A

### Historical and Current Terms for Understanding School Non-Attendance



## Appendix B

### Examples of Supportive Experiences Offered by East Renfrewshire Schools

Autism Spectrum Groups	RespectER
Care Experienced Group	Managing Exam Stress
Children 1st Support	Seasons For Growth
Community Learning and Development Support / Recovery Programme	Therapet
Connects Group (Engagement and Attendance)	Walk 'N Talk
ESOL Group	Young Carers Group
Flexible Work Placement	SfL Homework Support
Mosaic Mentoring	IDL Inclusion Group
Peer Mentor	Start the Week Club
Pupil Supporter	Breakfast Club
Fishing Group	RSHP Input
Nurture Check In	Mental Health and Wellbeing Group
Resilience Group	LIAM Programme
S1 Settling In Friendship Group	Kitbag
Boys Group	Wellbeing Hub
Girls Group	Nurture Check In and Groups
Connects	LGBTQi Group
Young Man's Group	Delaying Parenthood Programme
Young Women's Group	Outdoor Learning Group
Enhanced Pastoral Support (Learning and Nurture)	

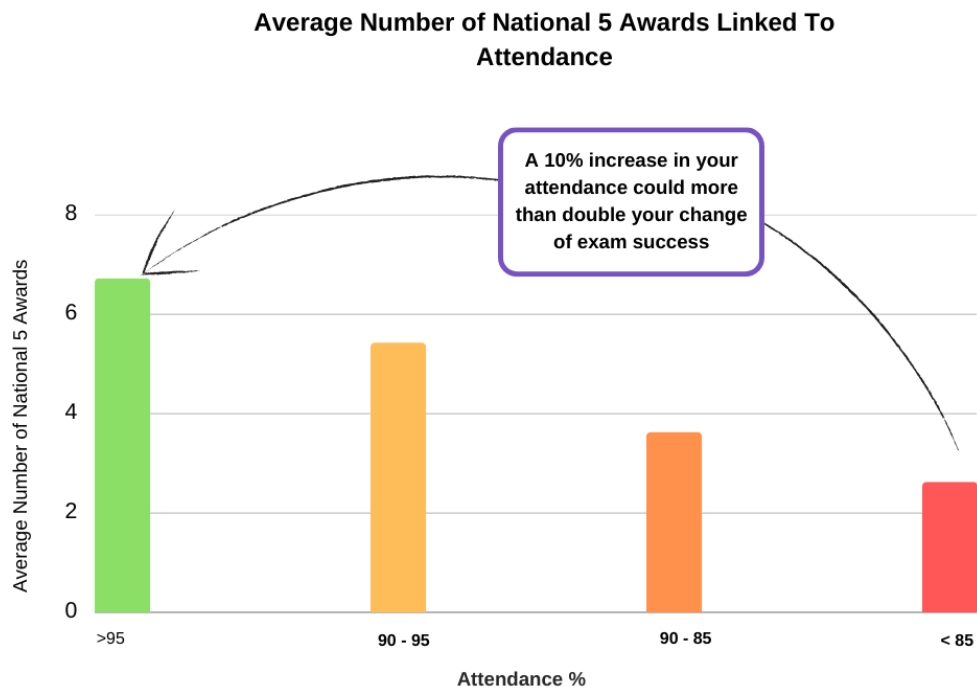
## Appendix C

Dear Parent/Carer,

Regular school attendance offers your child the best possible start in life and helps to prepare them for the world of work. School is not just about exams, it's about developing talents and abilities that allow your child to fulfill their potential and to follow their dreams whatever they might be.

In Barrhead High School our teachers work extremely hard to create and deliver exciting lessons and opportunities to ensure your child is included, engaged and involved in school life. Like you, we want your child to be aspirational about the future. It is no surprise that the more your child attends school the more likely they are to achieve their potential, and thrive in their future.

The graph below, based on local authority data, demonstrates that there is a clear link between school attendance and the average number of National 5 awards attained.



Your child's attendance to date for this session is X%. Could they improve on this? If so it's never too late to make a difference. If you are concerned about your child's attendance please do not hesitate to contact their pastoral care teacher. They will be happy to discuss ways to help you and your child improve their attendance and help you to set short term targets that can lead to long term improvements.

## Appendix D

The following Emotionally Based School Absence (EBSA) Assessments for Children and Young People and for Parents and Carers, are adapted from the School Refusal Assessment Scale by Kearney & Albano, with the authors' permission, to reflect changing terminology in this subject area.

### EMOTIONALLY BASED SCHOOL ABSENCE (EBSA) ASSESSMENT CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

People sometimes have different reasons for not going to school. Some people feel badly when they are at school, or when they are around other people. Some people want or need to be with their family, and others prefer to do things outside of school.

This form asks questions about why you find attending school difficult. This will help all of us understand how best to support you going forward.

For each question, pick one number that describes you best for the last few days. After you answer one question, go on to the next one. Don't skip any questions.

There are no right or wrong answers. Just pick the number that best fits the way you feel about going to school. Circle the number.

Here is an example of how it works. Try it. Circle the number that describes you best.

Example:

How often do you like to go shopping?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

Now go to the next page and begin to answer the questions.

Name:

Age:

Date:

Please circle the answer that best fits the following questions:

1. How often do you have bad feelings about going to school because you are afraid of something related to school (for example, tests, school bus, teacher, fire alarm)?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

2. How often do you stay away from school because it is hard to speak with the other people at school?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

3. How often do you feel you would rather be with your parent / carer than go to school?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

4. When you are not in school during the week (Monday to Friday) how often do you leave the house and do something fun?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

5. How often do you stay away from school because you will feel sad or depressed when you go?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

6. How often do you stay away from school because you feel embarrassed in front of other people at school?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

7. How often do you think about your parents / carers or family when in school?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

8. When you are not in school during the week (Monday to Friday), how often do you talk to or see other people (other than your family)?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

9. How often do you feel worse at school (for example scared, nervous or sad) compared to how you feel at home with your friends?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

10. How often do you stay away from school because you do not have many friends there?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

11. How much would you rather be with your family than go to school?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

12. When you are not in school during the week (Monday to Friday), how much do you enjoy doing different things (for example being with friends, going places)?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

13. How often do you have bad feelings about school (for example, scared, nervous, or sad) when you think about school on a Saturday and Sunday?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

14. How often do you stay away from certain places in school (e.g. hallways, places where certain groups of people are) where you would have to talk to someone?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

15. How much would you rather be taught by your parents / carers at home than by your teacher at school?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

16. How often do you miss school because you want to have fun outside of school?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

17. If you had less bad feelings (for example, scared, nervous, sad) about school, would it be easier for you to go to school?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

18. If it were easier for you to make new friends would it be easier for you to go to school?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

19. Would it be easier to go to school if your parents / carers went with you?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
-------	--------	-----------	---------------	---------	---------------	--------



0	1	2	3	4	5	6
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

20. Would it be easier for you to go to school if you could do more things you like to do after school hours (for example being with friends)?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

21. How much more do you have bad feelings about school (for example, scared, nervous or sad) compared to other people your age?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

22. How often do you stay away from school compared to other people your age?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

23. Would you like to be at home with your parents / carers more than other people your age would?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

24. Would you rather be doing fun things outside of school more than most people your age?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

Questionnaire End

## Scoring

	Function 1		Function 2		Function 3		Function 4	
	1.		2.		3.		4.	
	5.		6.		7.		8.	
	9.		10.		11.		12.	
	13.		14.		15.		16.	
	17.		18.		19.		20.	
	21.		22.		23.		24.	
Total Score	=		=		=		=	
Mean Score (TS/6)	=		=		=		=	
Relative Ranking	=		=		=		=	

### Functions:

1. To avoid school-related objects and situations (stimuli) that provoke negative affectivity (symptoms of dread, anxiety, depression, and somatic complaints)
2. To escape aversive social and or evaluative situations at school
3. To receive or pursue attention from significant others outside of school
4. To pursue tangible rewards outside of school

## Appendix E

### EMOTIONALLY BASED SCHOOL ABSENCE (EBSA) ASSESSMENT PARENTS AND CARERS

Name:

Date:

Please circle the answer that best fits the following questions:

1. How often does your child have bad feelings about going to school because they are afraid of something related to school (for example, tests, school bus, teacher, fire alarm)?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

2. How often does your child stay away from school because it is hard for them to speak with the other people at school?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

3. How often does your child feel they would rather be with you or your partner than go to school?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

4. When your child is not in school during the week (Monday to Friday) how often do they leave the house and do something fun?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

5. How often does your child stay away from school because they will feel sad or depressed if they go?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

6. How often does your child stay away from school because they feel embarrassed in front of other people at school?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

7. How often does your child think about you, your partner or your family when in school?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

8. When your child is not in school during the week (Monday to Friday), how often do they talk to or see other people (other than immediate family)?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

9. How often does your child feel worse at school (for example scared, nervous or sad) compared to how they feel at home with friends?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

10. How often does your child stay away from school because they do not have many friends there?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

11. How much would your child rather be with you or your family than go to school?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

12. When your child is not in school during the week (Monday to Friday), how much do they enjoy doing different things (for example being with friends, going places)?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

13. How often does your child have bad feelings about school (for example, scared, nervous, or sad) when they think about school on a Saturday and Sunday?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

14. How often does your child stay away from certain places in school (e.g. hallways, places where certain groups of people are) where they would have to talk to someone?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

15. How much would your child rather be taught by you or your partner at home than by their teacher at school?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

16. How often does your child miss school because they want to have fun outside of school?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

17. If your child had less bad feelings (for example, scared, nervous, sad) about school, would it be easier for them to go to school?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

18. If it were easier for your child to make new friends would it be easier for them to go to school?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

19. Would it be easier to go to school if you or your partner went with them?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

20. Would it be easier for your child to go to school if they could do more things they like to do after school hours (for example being with friends)?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

21. How much more does your child have bad feelings about school (for example, scared, nervous or sad) compared to other people their age?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

22. How often does your child stay away from school compared to other people their age?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

23. Would your child like to be at home with you or your partner more than other people their age would?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

24. Would your child rather be doing fun things outside of school more than most people their age?

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Half the Time	Usually	Almost Always	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

Questionnaire End

### Scoring

	Function 1		Function 2		Function 3		Function 4	
	1.		2.		3.		4.	
	5.		6.		7.		8.	
	9.		10.		11.		12.	
	13.		14.		15.		16.	
	17.		18.		19.		20.	
	21.		22.		23.		24.	
Total Score	=		=		=		=	
Mean Score (TS/6)	=		=		=		=	
Relative Ranking	=		=		=		=	

### Functions:

1. To avoid school-related objects and situations (stimuli) that provoke negative affectivity (symptoms of dread, anxiety, depression, and somatic complaints)
2. To escape aversive social and or evaluative situations at school
3. To receive or pursue attention from significant others outside of school
4. To pursue tangible rewards outside of school

## Appendix F

### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER FOR FAMILIES AND SCHOOL STAFF

(Adapted from Lincolnshire Council Guidelines, 2019)

<b>Educational Background Information</b>	
<p>If you can remember, what were things like in the early years and in nursery?</p> <p>If you have left, what were they like at primary school?</p> <p>Were there any significant events at school?</p> <p>Are there any additional support needs that we need to consider?</p> <p>Is there anything particularly tricky in relation to school work?</p>	
<b>Strengths, Interests and Resources</b>	
<p>What are you good at?</p> <p>What do you like?</p> <p>What are your hopes for the future?</p> <p>What do you want to do when you can officially leave school?</p>	
<b>Attendance Achievements so far</b>	



<p>What is or was going well in school?</p> <p>When things have been tricky in the past and you have managed to go in to school, what was different about those times?</p> <p>What has been the most helpful thing someone has done so far?</p> <p>What have you managed to do in the past to manage your worries about attending school?</p> <p>Do you have any ideas that you think might help looking forward?</p>	
<p><b>Family</b></p>	
<p>Can you tell me about your family?</p> <p>Who are you closest to?</p> <p>Have there been any recent changes in your family or with friends?</p>	
<p><b>Relationships</b></p>	
<p>Who are your friends?</p> <p>Who do you spend time with when you are in school?</p>	

Where do you feel happiest or safest when you are in school, and who would you be with?

Do you socialise or spend time with others out-with school and home? Who are they and what do you get up to?

**Family Views**

What have you been able to find out about why your child finds it difficult at school?

What do you think would work for your child?

What are their strengths and interests?

What is / was going well?

When did you notice them having difficulties? What with?

What do their relationships with peers appear to be like?

What are their relationships like with staff?

How do they respond to school work and home work?

If you have witnessed any distress, what has it looked like?

Does everyone in the family share the same view? What are the differences, if there are any?

**Questions for School Staff**

What are the young person's strengths?

What is / was going well?

Did you notice them having difficulties? If so what with?

What do their relationships with peers appear to be like?

What are their relationships like with staff?

How do they respond to school work?

If you have witnessed any distress, what has it looked like?

What support is currently in place and what does it look like?

What has their attendance been like in your class?

Do you have any ideas for support that you think might be successful, based on your knowledge and relationship with them?

Any other comments, observations or thoughts on what might need to be done to support?

## Appendix G

### De-escalatory Practices

General principles of safer working practice include:

- Knowing the child or young person you are working with:
  - What are the early warning signs that they are finding it difficult to regulate their emotions? What will you observe them doing or saying?
  - What are their interests and motivators?
  - What could be used to distract or divert attention?
  - What are the effective calming activities and de-escalation strategies?
  - What should be avoided? What escalates the situation?
- Avoiding confrontation, for example standing toe to toe, stand a little to the side instead
- When approaching a child or young person, approach from the side. Approaching from the front may be perceived as an aggressive act. Approaching from behind may startle;
- Keep your feet hip width apart with your knees slightly flexed, arms at your side, palms open (rather than closed in a fist);
- Monitor your own body language, avoiding dominating eye contact and jaw tension;
- Try to remain calm, be aware of your own emotional and behavioural responses;
- Remember that sometimes the hardest, but best thing to do is nothing, to allow the situation to de-escalate naturally;
- When they step backwards – do the same;
- Step backwards in demanding situations – give the person space and time;
- Turn your body so that you are side-on in relation to the child or young person with only your head facing them;  
Check with the first adult to respond as to whether they need support or not, if not, give everyone space by leaving the area;
- Where it is necessary and safer to do so, remove other people from the area.

In some cases, where children or young people present a foreseeable and significant risk of physical harm to themselves or others, it is advised that staff receive relevant training in Behaviour Support Strategies (BSS). Further advice around this can be sought from the Educational Psychologist through the Joint Support Team forum.

## Appendix H

### Feature of Effective Practice and Support for Autistic People experiencing EBSA

Anxiety and fear can be very dominant emotions for autistic people. Many of the challenges that autistic people encounter arise within the rules, parameters and constraints of a neuro-typically dominant social world. School systems generally reflect this dominance, resulting in higher risk for neuro-atypical people to experience higher levels of stress. For some autistic people, this would have been underlined by lockdown during the pandemic, where these daily stressors were suddenly removed. We know that some children, young people and families have found some aspects of the return to full time education difficult. However for others, the structure, routine, predictability, engagement, and separation of home and school contexts, as well as reconnection with key adults and peers, has been very welcome. It really depends on the individual and their experience.

Some autistic people will benefit from strong visual and perceptual reasoning skills, and enjoy learning and activities that involve pictures, patterns and logic. However you may find that their spoken language develops slowly or incompletely, that they are less likely to understand creative or idiomatic language, and that their verbal reasoning skills are not as strong as most others for their age and stage. They may also have differences in how they process auditory information, so spoken words and their meaning might disappear quite quickly, or they may not follow that instructions apply to them as individuals. They may also have a limited emotional vocabulary. This type of profile is perhaps more familiar as it is aligned to a historically narrower understanding of an autistic profile.

Some autistic people will present quite differently to this, for example, they may have very strong verbal reasoning skills, an interest in vocabulary and the written word, be immersed in the world of emotional literacy, highly attuned to their internal thoughts and feelings, but perhaps require processing time and time out from linguistic, cognitive and social activities. Some autistic people experience delayed effects in response to an act or experience, with their reaction coming hours or days later. Some need more time to identify their internal emotions.

Practitioners can reduce anxiety by creating more consistency and through a range of approaches that make the school experience more predictable:

- *Keep things visual:* Either pictorial, written down or using videos, depending on the individual. Visual prompts are always helpful to gain and direct attention, to support comprehension and enhance learning experiences. Make visual cue cards available for support around daily social communication if required.
- *Enhance the structure:* Weekly timetables, daily schedules and learning activities broken down into shorter, more manageable steps will often help. Stick to clear timescales, start and finish activities on time, and give children and young people

a chance to complete work that isn't managed at another time so that they can experience closure and not worry about loose ends.

- *Break the problems down:* Explore the use of social stories for specific experiences that they find challenging. Consider a time-out strategy, and a plan for where to go that is safe and appropriate, if things are getting tough for any reason.
- *Time to process:* Begin by using the child or young person's name before you speak to them. Allow time for them to process new information, up to 10 seconds for a response before checking that they have heard and understood the question / expectation / instruction. Ask them to repeat back in their own words if they can.
- *Make it easier:* Keep language simple, concise and consistent to avoid overload, and supplement with visuals where possible. Break the tasks down into more manageable steps
- *Teach them how:* Teach them social interaction and conversational rules, for example when to start, when it's ok to interrupt, what turn taking looks like, remaining on topic, follow up questions, personal space, facial expressions and non-verbal communication, when and how to end politely. Teach appropriate voice volume and tone awareness for different contexts. Model appropriate social use of language e.g. sentence openers and responses to familiar types of questions. Encourage them to ask what others mean by any phrases or use of words that seem atypical. This will help to develop their social confidence and ability to develop peer relationships.
- *Support change:* Enhance support for transitions where necessary e.g. with the support of an adult, meeting and greeting, alternative transition times such as just before the bell, supports to manage the sensory overload (e.g. headphones). Prepare and equip them to manage change in advance: when will it happen, what should they expect, what is expected of them, how long it will last, and what will happen after? What can they do to help manage the change? Give them time to process that change is coming, e.g. "in five minutes the bell will go..." and provide clearly defined breaks between structured activities, and choices to manage unstructured times.
- *Tell them why:* Explain the reasons behind decisions and changes that affect them. Teach the school values, rules and boundaries explicitly, and explore the logic behind them (this rule is in place because...respect is a core school value because...). Explicitly teach and remind them that when their teacher is addressing the class, it is likely that they are also speaking to them too, so attending and listening is important.
- *Question the school's own norms:* Sometimes things are done a certain way because they always have been and nobody has really questioned why. If the school bell is too loud – can it be turned down, turned off or changed? Does it really need to go at all in some instances? The answer might be yes, but question whether norms can be changed to really benefit autistic learners, especially where

they will not make much difference to anyone else. Maybe the PTA can help run a Silent Disco for a change or to celebrate Autism Awareness Week?

- *Special interests:* Capitalise on their interests and strengths and tap into the subjects that they are passionate about, then tailor their curricular experiences around these. You can also make the links between your subject area and theirs explicit.
- *Make them feel useful and capable:* “I’d find it so helpful if you could...” Give them the chance to showcase their strengths, talents and interests.
- *Have restorative discussions:* Especially when things haven’t worked out, and use visuals to support questioning (e.g. What happened? Who was affected? How did it make you feel? What needs to happen now?) and visual prompts for responses (e.g. “it was too loud...”, “I felt angry...”)
- *Make sure you’re clear:* Consider how your language and phrasing could have been misinterpreted and check that you have been understood as you intended to be. Be as accurate and concrete as you can. Teach them the meaning of unusual phrases and encourage them to ask for clarification when people use language they don’t understand e.g. “They are off to play football in the bus” doesn’t mean they are playing football inside the bus. People are very often loose and inaccurate with the language they use and rely on people getting the ‘jist’ of what they mean – often relying heavily on context or prior discussion / knowledge. This is often fundamental to communication errors between autistic and non-autistic people.
- *Highlight your own mistakes and recovery:* Model how to cope with the frustration, and talk through how to recover. You can achieve this by pretending you don’t know something, or getting something wrong; perhaps asking them for help or to show you how to do a certain task that you want them to do.
- *Selected choices:* These give them the feeling of being in some control, which can reduce feelings of anxiety (e.g. “Do you want to start the phased return during period one or period two?”)
- *Flexible expectations:* Choose your battles: is your aim and need worth risking a breakdown in your relationship or an emotionally distressing experience for the young person? This is not the same as letting them do what they like. Boundaries are clearly important, but where possible avoid them becoming power battles. E.g. “Because I’m telling you... because I said so”
- *Backward learning:* If they are stuck, refusing or struggling, try backward learning – you or someone else helps them with 90% of the task, they finish the last 10% so experience closure (and build from there).
- *Indirect praise:* For example talk to a pupil or member of staff about something good the child has done while they are in earshot – may be more easily accepted than directly praising them.
- *Slowly forward:* A de-sensitisation or gradual exposure plan (e.g. building on short amounts of time in non-preferred situations (e.g. classes, subjects, areas of the building, transition points, with particular peers or staff) rewarding and recognising very small steps and appropriate use of contingency / safety plans.



- *Make it logical:* If the young person relates to it, use probability, maths, likelihood and logic wherever possible. Numbers are consistent, language and people are often not.
- *Explicitly teach for each context:* Emotional regulation, and desirable social behaviours often need to be taught directly and specifically around all potentially triggering situations. Some children and young people will not be able to flexibly transfer their coping strategies across different situations. This can sometimes be seen unhelpfully by others as evidence that they are 'picking and choosing' or 'manipulating' situations to their own end. Teach the behaviours and language you want to see, rather than focussing on the behaviour or language you want them to stop using.
- *Depersonalise the situation:* Use rules to your advantage, e.g. "I have a dress code for work, because those are the rules of the system."

## Appendix I

### CASE STUDY EXAMPLE

#### Background

Jane turned 12 and was about to start secondary school. During lockdown Jane spent an increased amount of time with her family, as did most children. She started washing her hands more and more but would venture outside for fresh air. Gradually this became less and she found it difficult to go into the garden as she wanted to stay inside. On occasion, before Jane's need to stay at home became really problematic, she would head out in the car to a drive through for food with her family, however this also stopped quite abruptly by June 2020.

When schools returned in June 2020 the primary school tried to engage Jane in transition visits to secondary school but she found the thought of it really challenging. Mum and dad were extremely supportive but worried about what this might mean for transition to the local high school.

Jane was already known to CAMHS and the Family Wellbeing Service as referrals had gone in at the start of Lockdown.

Although Jane was invited to transition visits to the secondary school but did not attend, the Pastoral Support Teacher was in close contact with Mum due to shared information, from the primary school, about how much Jane's mental health had deteriorated. Mum was worried about next steps. The contact with Mum happened quickly, within 1 week of the primary school getting in touch with the secondary school.

The following steps are details of what happened next, from information gathering, assessment, planning and intervention to outcome.

In June 2020, two meetings took place with Jane's parents, at the high school to start of information gathering process using EBSA Assessments (Appendix D and E) alongside the question framework for Families and Staff (Appendix F)

Analysis of the information detailed that Jane was scared to leave home because of germs. She was terrified of being caught out and not being able to wash her hands. She was also worried about catching Covid.

Phone calls took place between Mum and the Pastoral Teacher to agree next steps, which in this case was leave things until August and let Jane relax.

In August, a home visit was offered by the Pastoral Teacher however Mum explained that Jane had made some progress during the Summer and was able to go short car journeys and outside again for a small amount of time. This meant that an invitation to meet outside the school was possible. All meetings took place at the end of the school day when the building and grounds were quieter.

The first meeting was a brief hello from 6 feet away for 10 minutes to engage. Masks on!

The second meeting, 3 days later, was a 15 minute chat with Mum and Jane. Again, just to reconnect and engage. The topic of conversation was anything other than school!

The third meeting, 3 days later, was a brief Walk & Talk around the building. Just Jane and the Pastoral Teacher. Mum waited at the front of the building.

The fourth meeting, 2 days later, was a longer Walk & Talk, just Jane and the Pastoral Teacher.

This approach continued for 2 weeks, where the time spent walking gradually increased, until Jane felt comfortable enough to walk around the back of the building and meet in the school grounds at the beginning of September.

The first time Jane entered the grounds she was shaking and had to turn back. The Pastoral Teacher and Jane tried again the next day and made it to the back of the building where Jane sat for a few minutes “tolerating” the feeling of school. She left looking exhausted but happier.

This approach continued for 3 weeks, allowing Jane to get to know the adult and vice versa. Each time, Jane stayed longer. Adding 5 minutes per visit was agreed with Jane, Mum and the Pastoral Teacher before starting the work together. Once Jane was comfortable with the meetings she explained that she used to really enjoy comprehension and reading. Therefore the novel being used in her English class was made available for her to take home and read, at the suggestion of the Pastoral Teacher.

At the next visit Jane asked what the class were doing in English and wondered if she would be able to try some work to take home. A pack was provided by the English department and Jane agreed to let her English teacher pop down and say hello the next time she was sitting outside at the back of the building.

The English teacher made herself available to connect with Jane at her next visit. She left work for Jane which allowed Jane to do English comprehension work each time she came to the school.

A pattern quickly developed with Jane’s visits and it became a routine. Something familiar that she had a say in. Attending the building, albeit outside in the grounds, twice a week at the same time (3.45pm to 4.45pm) to do the same type of work for English. Mum would drop Jane off and wait for her at the front of the school.

By mid-October Jane was beginning to ask questions about what was inside the building and wondered about cutting through the main foyer to get from the back to the front quickly, rather than going all around the perimeter. The Janitor had got to know her because he would look out for her to open the gate each time she needed to go around the back. Therefore the Janitor was invested in supporting Jane before

she entered the building and was more than happy to help her try something different.

The entry to the building was discussed, planned and communicated to everyone involved.

Jane was reassured that there were gel stations at each door and was reminded of the procedures and expectations of everyone having clean hands before the entered the building. This eased Jane's anxiety around germs.

The entry was to involve a 30 second crossing from one side of the foyer to another. The Janitor was ready to open the doors and Jane met her mum at the front of the building, having entered at the back of the building with the Pastoral Teacher. She held her breath as she went in and breathed out at the other side.

The following week the pastoral teacher reminded Jane of her success and asked if it was possible to try to do the same with the main entrance. Although she looked worried, Jane agreed. As before, Jane held her breath, moved through the main entrance doors, stood for a few seconds and then walked back out to see her Mum.

Realising her success she turned round and did it again...and again.

Motivated to build upon her success Jane asked if she could try to do her work inside the school, at a room at the front of the building, rather than outside. Arrangements were made for Jane to sit in one of the small offices after school hours, alongside the Pastoral Teacher. After only 3 sessions, Jane asked if she could see the ground floor...then the first floor...then the third.

Jane was also introduced to the Head Teacher and her Head of Year during the internal visits.

At the beginning of November Jane was ready to visit the building during the day. To feel what it was like when it was busy. Plans were agreed and put in place for Jane to spend break time in the building with her friends the next day. The Pastoral Teacher met her at the door a few minutes before the bell and took her along to where her friends were going to be, then walked Jane back to the front door when the break was over.

Then Jane visited the next day and the next. After a week she wanted to come in at lunchtime.

Within three weeks Jane was on a customised timetable with key subjects that she felt she could start with. This included time in the support base, a quiet space to go at break and lunch and a daily check-in with her Pastoral Teacher.

As a new subject was introduced to her timetable Jane was introduced to the member of staff, before her first class. All staff teaching Jane were made aware of strategies and approaches that would work with her and were encouraged to speak to the Pastoral Support Teacher at any point, should they have any questions. A

lunchtime Case Conference was also organised for the teachers who had Jane in their class to share key information that would help everyone working with and supporting Jane.

By the beginning of December, Jane was in school full time.

Some additional points to make:

- Very regular review meetings took place between the parents and school, including formal reviews with the Educational Psychologist.
- The Pastoral Support Teacher almost immediately, made contact with the other agencies in Jane's life and agreed the graded exposure plan with the Clinical Psychologist at CAMHS. School and CAMHS used the same strategies when talking to Jane about going back to school.
- It was NOT all plain sailing. At times Jane was overwhelmed with the return to school and this had to be managed to support her at all times. Some days were easier than others and, at times she needed a rest day.
- Mum and Dad required support and for someone to listen to their story, especially about how much Jane had changed during lockdown and what happened to her. The information gathering stage was really important.
- Ongoing support was provided for Jane throughout S1 to ensure her emotional health was also a priority; e.g. group work, daily check-ins, anxiety management work
- Jane was allowed out of class to wash her hands when she felt she needed to. This gradually decreased as the year went on.
- Jane was motivated to get to school, albeit extremely anxious. This helped, a lot.
- Relationships were key: the connections with the Pastoral Support Teacher and the Janitor were crucial.
- The motivation of other staff members to support as a team was very helpful e.g. the English Teacher providing materials and being present at the end of the school day.
- Not all situations will be like this one but flexibility, creativity and determination was a very important factor with this young person.

## References

- Aqeel, M. & Rehna, T. (2020). Association among school refusal behaviour, self-esteem, parental school involvement and aggression in punctual and truant school-going adolescents: a multilevel analysis. *International Journal of Human Rights in Healthcare*, 13(3), 385-404.
- Bowles, T.V. & Scull, J. (2018). The Centrality of Connectedness: A Conceptual Synthesis of Attending, Belonging, Engaging and Flowing. *Journal of Psychologists and Counsellors in Schools*.
- British Psychological Society. (2015). *School attendance, exclusion and persistent absence*. Retrieved from Behaviour Change - School attendance, exclusion and persistent absence (2017).pdf (bps.org.uk)
- Childs, J. & Lofton, R. (2021). Masking Attendance: How Education Policy Distracts from the Wicked Problem(s) of Chronic Absenteeism. *Educational Policy*, 35(2), 213-234.
- Corcoran, S., Bond, C. & Knox, L. (2022). Emotionally based school non-attendance: two successful returns to school following lockdown. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 38(1), 75-88.
- Gallé-Tessonneau, M, Johnsen, D.B. & Keppens, G. (2019). The relationship between mental health and absenteeism in a community sample of French secondary school students: four profiles derived from cluster analysis. *European Journal of Education and Psychology*, 12(1), 77- 90.
- Golding, K.S., Phillips, S. & Bombèr, L. M. (2020). *Working with Relational Trauma in Schools*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- González, C., & Kearney, C.A. (2021). Functional risk-profiles of moderate school attendance problems. In M. Gren-Landell (Ed.), *School attendance problems: A research update and where to go* (pp. 77-81). Stockholm: Jerringfonden.
- Havik, T. (2021). School-Related Risk Factors. In M. Gren Landell (Ed.), *School attendance problems: A research update and where to go* (pp. 69-74). Jerringfonden.
- Heyne, D., Gren-Landell, M., Melvin, G. & Gentle-Genitty, C. (2019). Differentiation Between School Attendance Problems: How and Why? *Cognitive and Behavioural Practice*, 26(1), 8-34.
- Kearney, C.A. (2021). Integrating systemic and analytic approaches to school attendance problems: Synergistic frameworks for research and policy directions. *Child and Youth Care Forum*, 1-42.
- Kearney, C.A. & Albano, A. M. (2018). *When Children Refuse School. A Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Approach (3rd ed)*. Oxford University Press.

- Kearney, C. & Graczyk, P.A. (2020). A Multidimensional, Multi-tiered System of Supports Model to Promote School Attendance and Address School Absenteeism. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 23, 316-337.
- Lauchlan, F. (2003). Responding to chronic non-attendance: A review of intervention approaches. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 19(2), 133-146.
- Lee, H. (2019). The Use of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for School Refusal Behaviour in Educational Psychology Practice. *Educational Psychology Research and Practice*, 5(2), 2019.
- Lincolnshire County Council. (2020). *Anxiety Based School Refusal*. Retrieved from <https://offschool.org.uk/secondary-school-approaches/anxiety-based-school-refusal/>
- Lomholt, J. J., Johnsen, D. B., Silverman, W. K., Heyne, D., Jeppesen, P., & Thastum, M. (2020). Feasibility study of Back2School, a modular cognitive behavioral intervention for youth with school attendance problems. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, 1–15.
- Lyons, E. & Coyle, A. (2015).
- MacKay-Brown, L., McGrath, R., Dalton, L., Graham, L., Smith, A., Ring, J. & Eyre, K. (2019). Reengagement With Education: A Multidisciplinary Home-School-Clinic Approach Developed in Australia for School-Refusing Youth. *Cognitive and Behavioural Practice*, 26, 92-106.
- Nurture UK. (2022). Six Principles of Nurture. Retrieved from <https://www.nurtureuk.org/applying-the-six-principles-of-nurture/>
- O'Hagan, S., Bond, C. & Hebron, J. (2021). What do we know about home education and autism? A thematic synthesis review. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 80, 1-15.
- Phelps, C. & Sperry, L.L. (2020). Children and the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice and Policy*, 12(1), 73-75.
- Rae, T. (2020). *Understanding & Supporting Children & young People with Emotionally Based School Avoidance (ESBA)*. Hinton House Publishers.
- Reivich, K. & Shatte, A. (2003). *The Resilience Factor*. Broadway Books.
- Scottish Government. *Included, engaged and involved part 1: promoting and managing school attendance*. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.scot/publications/included-engaged-involved-part-1-positive-approach-promotion-management-attendance-scottish-schools/>
- West Sussex Council. (2021). Emotionally Based School Avoidance. *West Sussex Educational Psychology Service*.

## Further Reading

A resource for parents / carers:

Kearney, C.A. (2007). *Getting your child to say “yes” to school: A guide for parents of youth with school refusal behavior*. New York: Oxford University Press.

A resource for school staff:

Kearney, C.A. (2018). *Helping school refusing children and their parents: A guide for school-based professionals (2nd ed.)*. New York: Oxford University Press.