



Emotional Barriers to School Attendance (EBSA)

Points to consider

- Impact of COVID-19
- Rapidly developing area – no blame/shame
- Wellbeing
- Confidentiality



"Do the best you can
until you know better.

Then when you know
better, do better."

Maya Angelou



What we will cover...

- Current understanding of EBSA and how this is changing.
 - Whole-school approaches including the WARMTH Framework.
 - Individual approaches including developing support plans.
- 

What is EBSA?

Emotional Barriers to School Attendance (EBSA) is a 'broad umbrella term' used to describe a group of children and young people who experience barriers to education/school attendance.

From those who are in a setting but experiencing anxiety to those who have been out of school for an extended amount of time, and everything in between.

It is anxiety driven and not a choice
Can't, not won't.



Evolving terminology

Many terms associated with low attendance, e.g.:

- EBSA, EBBSA, EBSNA, EBSR
- School refusal
- School phobia
- Truancy
- Separation anxiety
- Children Missing Education
- Persistent / severe absenteeism



Greater Manchester project to radically re-write the EBSA Guidance:

**BARRIERS TO
EDUCATION**

WHAT DO UK DATA TELL US ABOUT THE OCCURANCE OF PERSISTENCE ABSENCE?

- In 2018/19, the year before the pandemic, persistent absence rates were 10.9%.
- In 2022/23, absence rates were 22.3% (22.5% in the year before)

In 2022/23:

- Persistent absence was highest in special schools, rates of 38.7% (compared to 28.8% before the pandemic);
- And in secondary schools, 28.3% (13.7% in 18/19), compared to primary schools, 17.2% (8% in 18/19)
- 37.9% of disadvantaged pupils were persistently absent.
- 12% of children and young people with a probable mental health difficulty missed more than 15 days of school compared with just 4% of those unlikely to have a mental health difficulty (NHS Digital, 2022)

PATTERNS NATIONALLY INDICATE CHILDREN WHO ARE ND, EXPERIENCE SEND OR MH NEEDS ARE PARTICULARLY VULNERABLE.

ABSENCE DISPROPORTIONATELY AFFECTS VULNERABLE GROUPS (KEARNEY, 2020)

ATTENDANCE IN SCHOOLS IS IN CRISIS, WITH PROFOUND CONSEQUENCES BOTH FOR OUR EDUCATION SYSTEM AND FOR SOCIETY MORE WIDELY (BURTONSHAW & DORELL, 2023)

UK CONTEXT

- Increased school absence since Covid-19 in England - rose from 10.9% to 21.2% (DfE, 2023)
- Increase in mental health difficulties among children and young people since 2010 (Hamilton, 2024)
- Challenges of teacher recruitment and retention (Weale, 2023)
- Reduced funding for schools, particularly affecting areas such as SEND (TA support) and arts (Toynbee, 2023)
- LA overspend on SEND & significant rise in EHCP assessment requests (increase 23% in 2022, DfE, 2023)
- Cost of living crisis (Burtonshaw & Dorell, 2023)
- Changing parental perceptions of school attendance (Burtonshaw & Dorrell, 2023)

Caroline Bond, 2024

**I FEAR THAT ATTENDANCE HAS BECOME THE
ISSUE OF OUR TIME.**

**THE NUMBER OF CHILDREN REGULARLY
MISSING SCHOOL HAS MORE THAN DOUBLED
COMPARED TO PRE-PANDEMIC AND WE ARE
ONLY MAKING SLOW PROGRESS IN STEADYING
SCHOOL ABSENCE RATES. I AM DEEPLY
CONCERNED ABOUT THE DAMAGE CAUSED BY
SCHOOL ABSENCES: THOUSANDS OF CHILDREN
ARE MISSING
OUT ON THEIR RIGHT TO EDUCATION
(CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER, 2023)**

What have we learnt?

- Most school-anxious children do **WANT** to attend school however the anxiety becomes overwhelming. They need support and understanding.
- Often need adjustments to their daily routines, timetables and the school environment.
- Difficulties with school attendance should not be viewed simply as a behavioural problem – research acknowledges that it is a **highly complex, multi-dimensional difficulty**, requiring an individualised approach which assesses the holistic strengths and needs for each child.
- Pressures to focus on attendance rather than addressing the child's needs can make things even harder to fix in the longer term. **Latest thinking:** forcing a child to attend when they are not ready, results in trauma, poorer outcomes and longer-term damage, particularly if the underlying causes of anxiety have not been identified and supported.
- **Onset is usually gradual** rather than sudden. EBSA awareness and early intervention, with professionals and parents working together, is vital to minimise impact on education and wellbeing.

Young people (in fact all people) are innately driven to meet their 3 basic needs...



Autonomy: Having choice and control over their actions



Relatedness: Feeling connected with and accepted by the people around you



Competence: Feeling that you are learning and developing skills.



This means that young people strive to grow, develop and have positive connections.

Young people do well IF they can.



Indicators of EBSA

If you have worked with a young person or family where EBSA has been a concern, what sorts of signs were reported?



Indicators of EBSA

Reluctance to leave home or to separate from family

Feeling sick, headaches, sweating, panic attacks, stomach pain, rapid weight change

Low self esteem

Seem overly worried/anxious

Closed – keep feelings to themselves

Difficulties with learning, under-achievement of learning potential

Worried about exams/tests

Negative relationships with teacher(s)

Social isolation and avoidance of peers

Patterns e.g. missing particular days/subjects, after weekends and holidays

Poor attendance – long bouts of absence; frequent absences for minor illnesses

Understanding Attendance:

Findings on the drivers of pupil absence from over 30,000 young people in England

IMPACTED EVALUATION

BELONGING

Sense of school belonging is a key driver of attendance across all contexts. This may be particularly important for females and is closely linked with **feeling safe** at school.

Y7-Y8

Challenge of a '**second transition**' from Year 7 to Year 8 is particularly pronounced for Pupil Premium pupils with SEND. **Sense of belonging** appears to be particularly associated with likelihood of attendance for Year 8 pupils.

INTERSECTIONAL

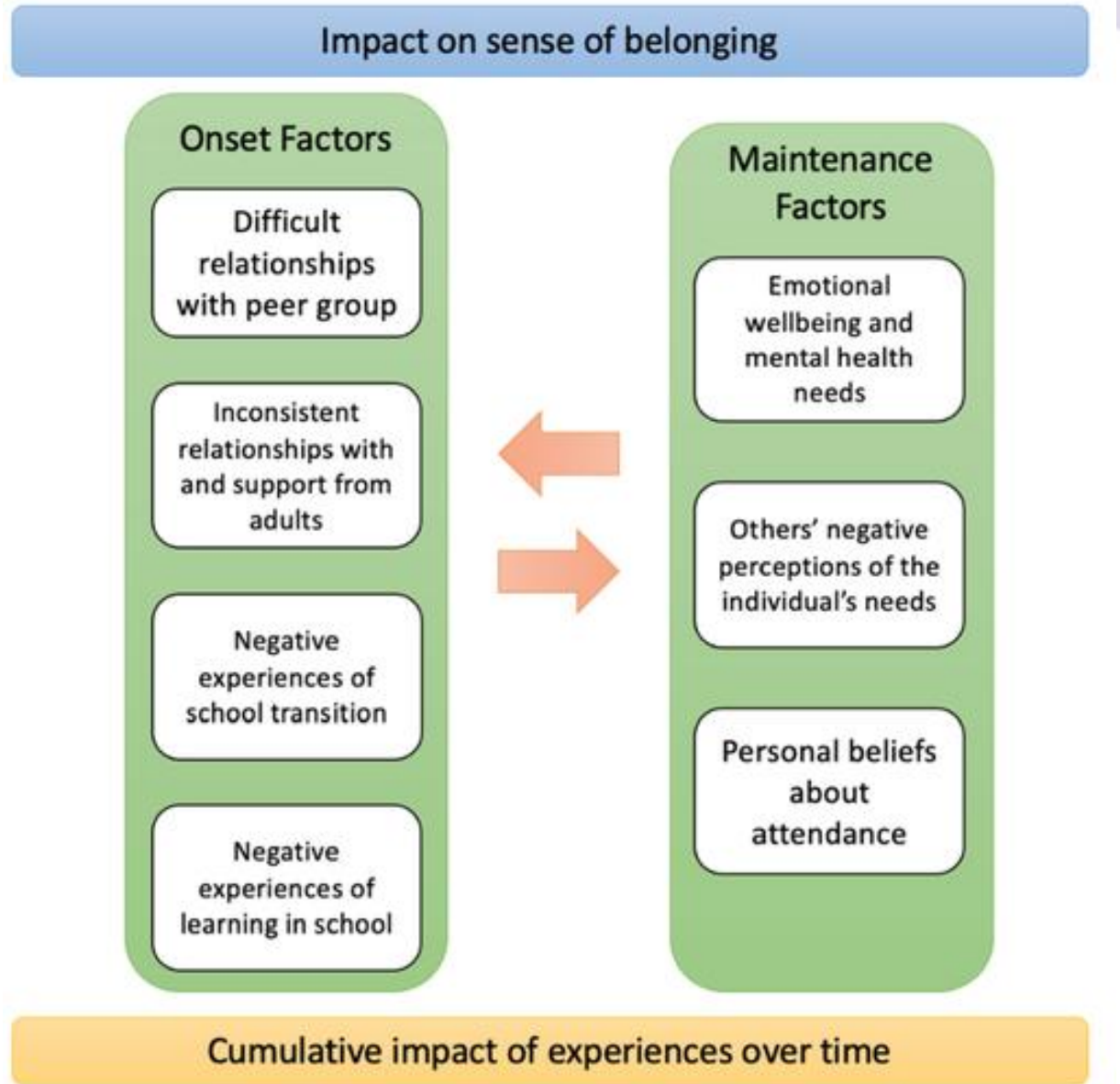
Attendance drivers are intersectional. School leaders should avoid considering demographic factors in isolation. Female pupils who are eligible for Pupil Premium and have a special educational need are particularly likely to be low attending.

RELATIONSHIPS

Awareness of sanctions and consequences isn't strongly linked to improved attendance. **Understanding of the importance of school and relationships with peers and teachers** were more strongly associated with attendance.

**Children tell us important information and try solve their problems through their behaviour
→ we need to listen.**

- Young people describe their non-attendance as a logical and understandable response to the situation.
- They want to be at school and have tried hard to be, but without changes to the environment it becomes too hard → not going to school is a last resort.
- Difficulties tend to start gradually and help early on, as soon as issues are raised, is important.
- Their wellbeing is impacted by not going to school



[Young people's experiences of extended school non-attendance \(Corcoran & Kelly, 2022\)](#)

Neurodivergence

Growing evidence base to indicate autistic children experience EBSA at a significantly earlier age, and their experience of it is more long lasting (termed School Distress in the study; Connelly et al., 2023 – 92% of 947 parents/carers survey said their child was neurodivergent).

‘Negative educational outcomes are often underpinned by a poor fit between school environments and autistic ways of being in the world’ (Hamilton, 2024)

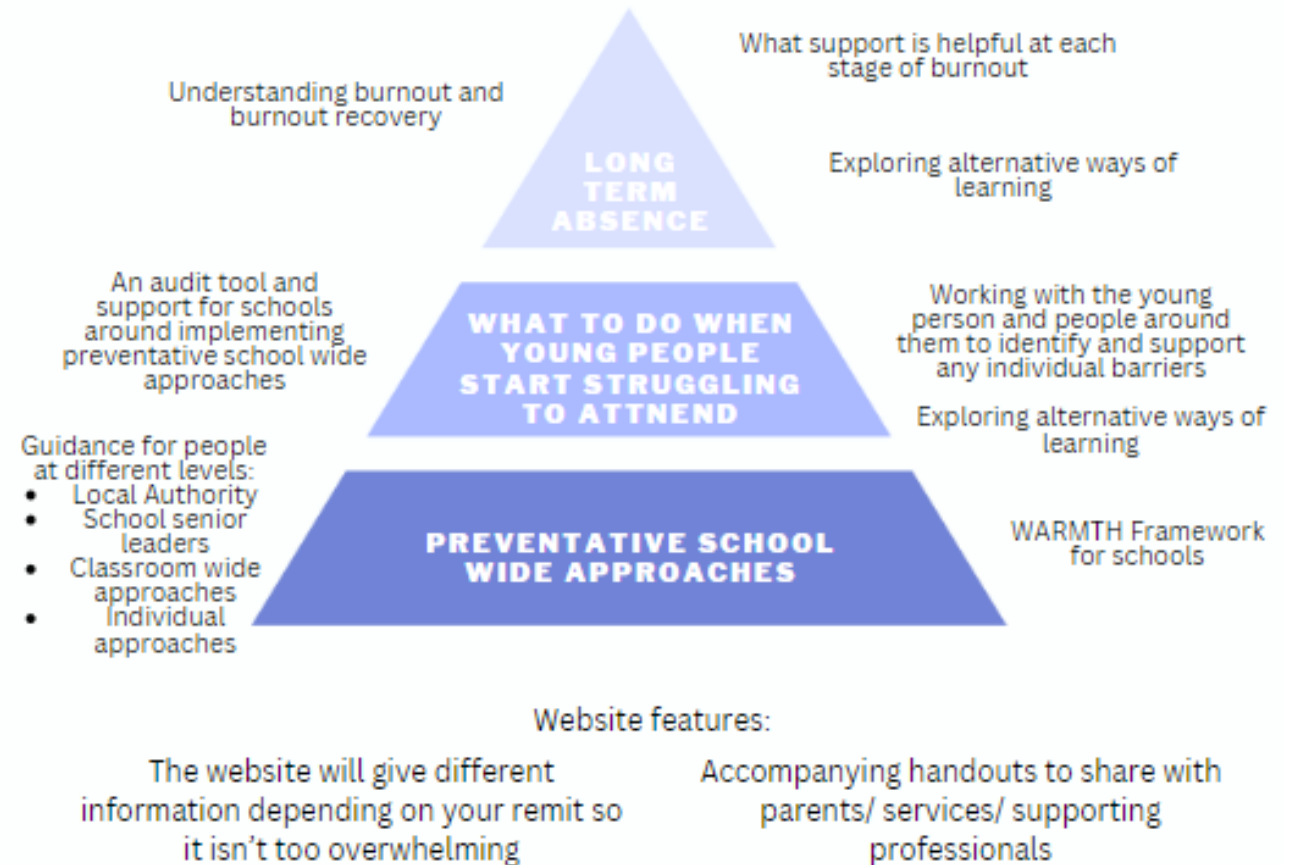
Useful resources

- *Training on Neurodiversity Affirming Inclusive Practices is available (EPS & LSS)*
- [Youth Services Nerd Club](#)
- [How Can Schools Better Support Neurodivergent Young People.pdf - Google Drive](#)
- [Autism Understood](#) - A website about autism, for autistic young people
- [Trauma | Autism Barriers to Education](#) – EBSA and burnout recovery guidance
- [The Nest Approach](#) (supporting autistic young people with meltdowns)
- [Spectrum Gaming](#) – Autistic community and advocacy group
- [Epic Autism Resources \(padlet.com\)](#) – developed by Spectrum Gaming

New GM-led Guidance



BARRIERS TO EDUCATION WEBSITE



<https://padlet.com/spectrumgaming/barriers-to-education-1bnrx2lf6iwfck52>

Key messages and principles

1. Can't, not won't – children do well if they can.
2. Preventing and responding to attendance difficulties needs to be a whole school approach. Early intervention is key.
3. Support first. Trust parental instincts and work with families.
4. Prioritise wellbeing and address wider wellbeing needs (belonging, friendships, self identity) – this supports access to learning.
5. Children and young people's views need to be central, and plans needs to be agreed at their pace.



Wellbeing First



Affirming Practice



Relational Approach



**Mutual Understanding
& Partnership**



Timely Response



Holistic Support

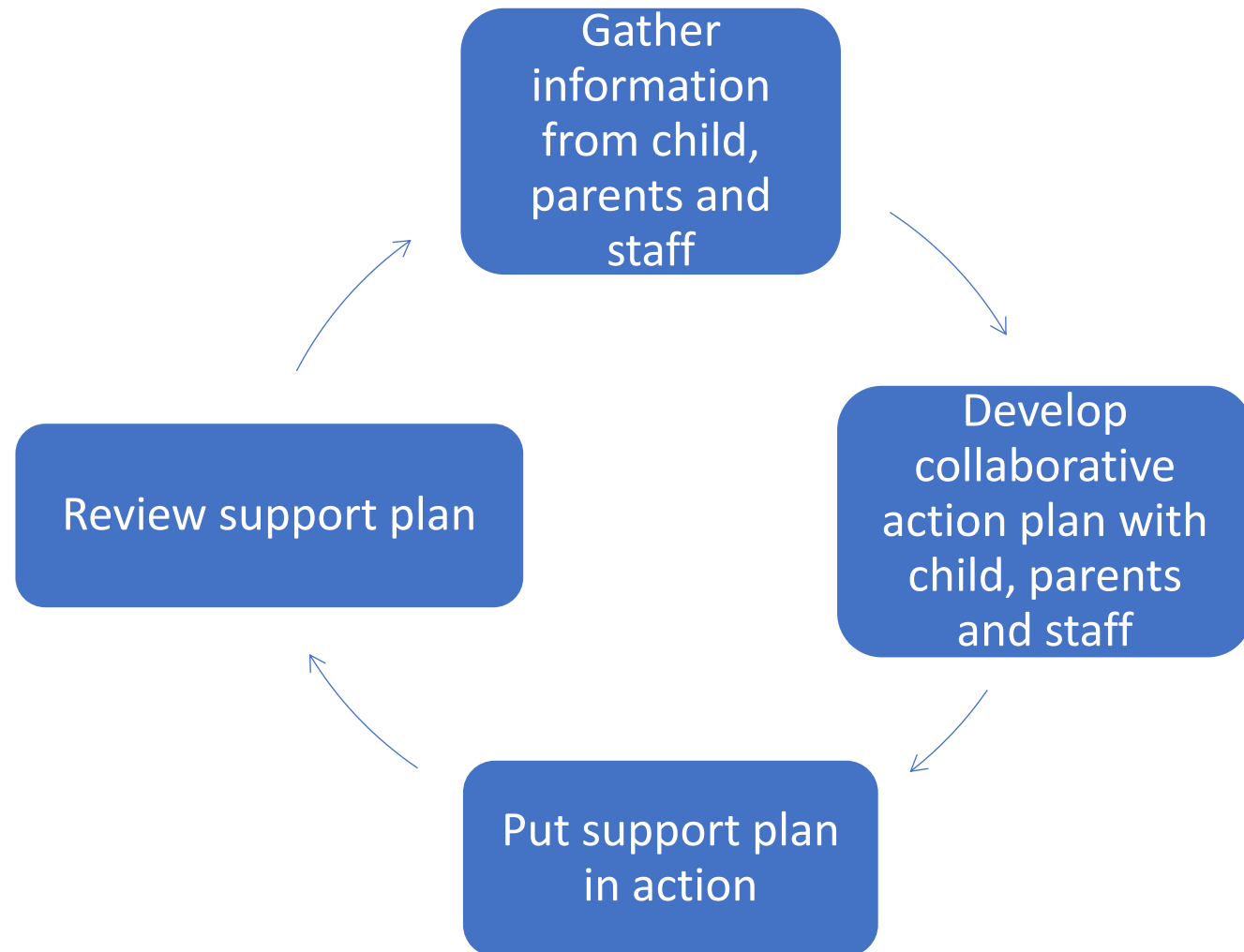
Early Response – is this clear in your school?

- How are concerns identified and raised?
- Who leads this?
- Home-school communication. How are the young person and their family's views made central to support plans? Who completes the information gathering tools, who leads on the analysis and action plans?
- How are adjustments / support plans agreed?
- How is consistency ensured? (e.g. develop school's own ideas bank linked to the Early Identification of Needs Tool)
- What is the plan for monitoring if things improve?
- What happens if progress is not made?

Developing a whole school approach and clear systems

- Develop school's **EBSA Champions** – needs a team approach.
- **Cascade information and access training** (ideally whole school), but especially important to share information with staff working directly with families and young people (e.g. Receptionist)
- Agree **school/college's early response** and communicate this clearly
- What will your **intervention plan** for children experiencing EBSA look like? (think about support for staff, the young person and their family). Is there flexibility to personalise support plans?
- **Identify whole school strategies**; link this to your whole school approach to mental health.
- **Early intervention is key and more successful: Listen to families when they raise concerns.**

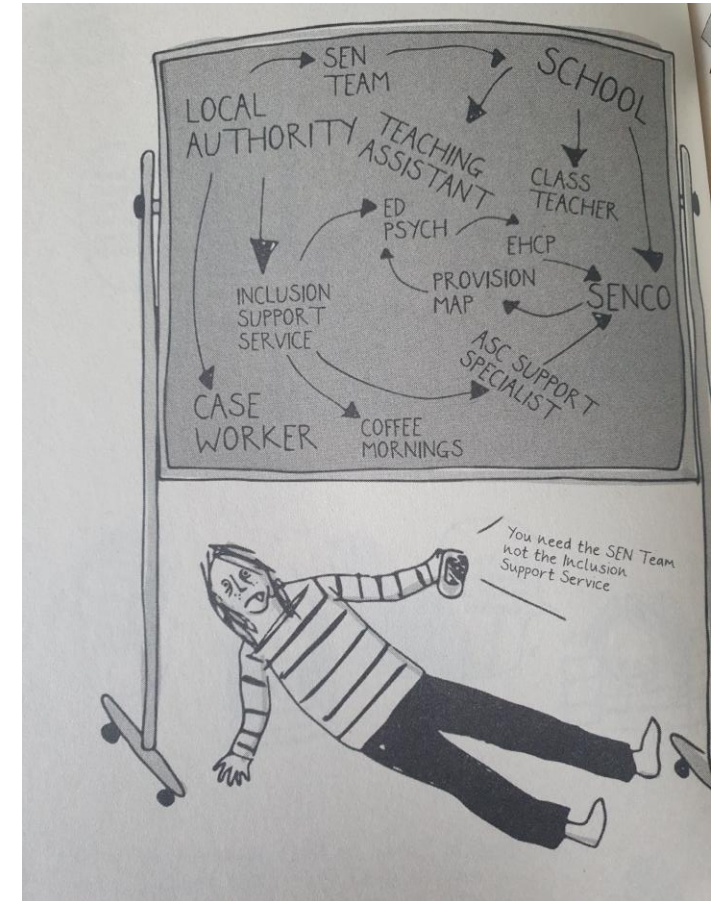
Assess, Plan, Do, Review Cycle



Involving Parents/ Carers

When my child is not ok, I am not ok

- Families share they often feel blamed or judged for their child's difficulties with attendance, when they are often trying their best.
- They care about their child's education and want to succeed; however, they need understanding and support and to be trusted they know their child best.



Can't Not Won't. A story about a child who couldn't go to school, by Eliza Fricker

Assess: Information Gathering Tools

What information gathering tools / approaches do you use to gather young people and parent/ carer views and develop support plans?

- **Whole School Audit** supports prevention.
- **Attendance Graduated Response** - indicators and intervention prompts at all % (inc. 100%).
- **Tracking and Monitoring**
- **Early Identification of Needs Tool (EINT)** – useful way to structure conversations with parents/ carers and has a linked ideas bank. Looks at a range of risk factors.
- **Return to School Questionnaire** – updated 2023 to include child/ young person version of EINT.
- **Card Sort Activity** – useful for developing detailed holistic picture
- **Mapping the Landscape** – activity exploring CYP views
- **Templates** available for capturing information gathered, recording actions and reviews.

More information about school experiences

Ideal School: [Drawing-the-Ideal-School-Prompt-Sheet-1.pdf \(doverstls.co.uk\)](https://doverstls.co.uk/Drawing-the-Ideal-School-Prompt-Sheet-1.pdf)

CARE Schedule: Teacher and Young person version (primary and secondary aged)

Card sort activity



Would Help Me	Would Not Help Me
Changing the way that I travel to or from school.	A chance to visit my school and/or teachers before going for the whole day.
Help to get to know my teachers and/or make new friends in school.	A way to speak to my parent/carer during the day.
Someone to stay with my parent/carer in the daytime.	A change to my lessons and/or subjects.
A chance to get up and move around after working for a while.	Ear defenders (noise reducing headphones).
Extra time to think before being expected to answer.	Adults quietly checking that I know what to do.
Not being expected to do group work.	Signals to ask for help (e.g., red/green card).
Being introduced to a group of people with similar interests e.g., for social times.	My own workspace with limited distractions.
Somewhere to do homework in school.	Attending online some of the time.
Help with the work in my lessons or to catch up on learning that I have missed.	Support for when people are unkind or bully me in school.
More people to talk to or spend time with at school.	Help to feel like I fit in at school.
Help other people to understand me/my needs.	Help me to feel less tired at school.

Card sort activity

School Environment Factors

I find the school environment overwhelming.



It may be helpful to draw a map of the school for this activity, to identify difficult areas or hotspots.

Which bits of school are better?

What would you say is overwhelming? (e.g., noise, crowding, strong smells, lighting, size/navigation).

Is there anywhere in school that you like to spend time?

Is there anywhere in school that you try to avoid?

Plan: Co-producing a Support Plan

- Assessment information **to be used to inform intervention planning.**
- Young person views to be central.
- Requires genuine involvement of young person and parents/carers.

How are you ensuring these in your approach?

1. Flexibility
2. Reasonable adjustments
3. Prioritising wellbeing and happiness
4. Staff training
5. Kindness
6. Pastoral & mental health support
7. Proactive SENCO
8. Trusting parental opinion / experience
9. Accommodations/ creative thinking
10. Inclusion for SEND/ ill health

Parent views on what helps unblock barriers to school attendance (Square Peg, survey completed by 2000 families)

EBSA Support Plan

Name: <i>Riley Smith</i>	D.O.B.: <i>08.11.2012</i>
School - home link: <i>Ms Morris (Form tutor)</i>	Supporting adults: <i>Attendance lead, parents, older sister</i>
Date of plan: <i>01.01.2025</i>	Review date: <i>01.02.2025</i>
Strengths: <i>Caring with animals and younger children</i> <i>Good relationship with key adult</i> <i>Good friendships</i>	Interests: <i>Enjoys baking and decorating cakes</i> <i>Creative, amazing artist ☺</i> <i>Enjoys practicals in science</i>

Areas for support:

- Struggles with handwriting, especially longer pieces of writing when their hand hurts.*
- Finds corridors overwhelming at lesson change over time*
- Maths teacher is on leave and there are different teachers for each lesson which Riley finds stressful. This has resulted in some detentions.*

Area for support	Outcome	Strategies (and how these are communicated to staff)	Review <i>01.02.2025</i>
<i>Handwriting</i>	<i>Riley will complete longer pieces of work on a laptop</i>	<i>Let all teachers know that Riley should come to the Learning Support Hub to complete longer writing tasks on a laptop (email all Riley's teachers).</i> <i>Make sure laptop charged in the Hub.</i> <i>Member of staff in the Hub to show Riley how to save documents and help Riley to email work to class teacher.</i>	<i>This has worked well mostly, but on Wednesday, there were no staff in the Hub. If this happens again, Riley can go to form tutor who is teaching Y7.</i>
<i>Struggles on busy corridors</i>	<i>Riley will leave lessons five minutes early</i>	<i>Give Riley a leave lesson early pass.</i> <i>Let all subject teachers know by email and add to Riley's pupil passport.</i>	<i>This has worked well and Riley likes getting lunch early.</i>
<i>Change of teacher in maths lessons</i>	<i>Riley will complete maths work in the Hub</i>	<i>Staff in the Hub to ask for maths work by email (from Maths Curriculum lead) and print or provide a laptop for Riley to complete it.</i> <i>Ms Morris to ask Maths Curriculum lead who in the maths department</i>	<i>Working well. On Friday last week, Riley did not receive work but completed online</i>

Do: EBSA core approaches to intervention

Provide time to talk – key adult in school (mentor outside of school)

Environmental adjustments

Prioritise wellbeing and wellbeing needs
Build on strengths

Develop coping skills though understanding anxiety triggers and management strategies (e.g. calming toolkit)

Increase exposure in small steps at a gradual pace (YP in control of).

Detailed and holistic understanding of the barriers to attendance (Return to School Questionnaire, EINT, Card Sort)

Core Approaches

Support strategies

- **Communication** - Key adult/consistent points of contact, one page profile, prep staff around what they say and where/ when
- 1:1 time with a trusted adult to **share views to inform support plans**
- **Hand of support** (draw round hand, write key adults and strategies in fingers and palm)
- **Colour code** timetable / map of school
- Plans for self-regulation or '**reset**' **breaks** in school day
- An agreed, **consistent** plan across home and school
- Psychoeducation to support the young person's understanding of themselves and their own anxiety
- Plan to **catch up** on missed work
- **Be hopeful and communicate your faith in the young person's abilities**

Key Points to Remember

- **It is important that the plan is agreed with the young person and led by them.**
- Every step must be **small and predictable.**
- **Our aim is to build resilience, not to overwhelm.**
- Even if things are going well, **do not move the goalposts without plenty of prior warning** (only make changes when current plan is consistently achieved).
- This can lead to disengagement due to **lack of trust** and pushing the CYP beyond their ability to cope, further entrenching difficulties with attendance.

Case Study:

Mia (aged 7)



She has moved schools three times since Year 2. She always found it difficult to go to school.

Mia is really creative and has a good imagination.

She has an older sibling who struggles to attend high school.

Mia likes to move around the classroom.

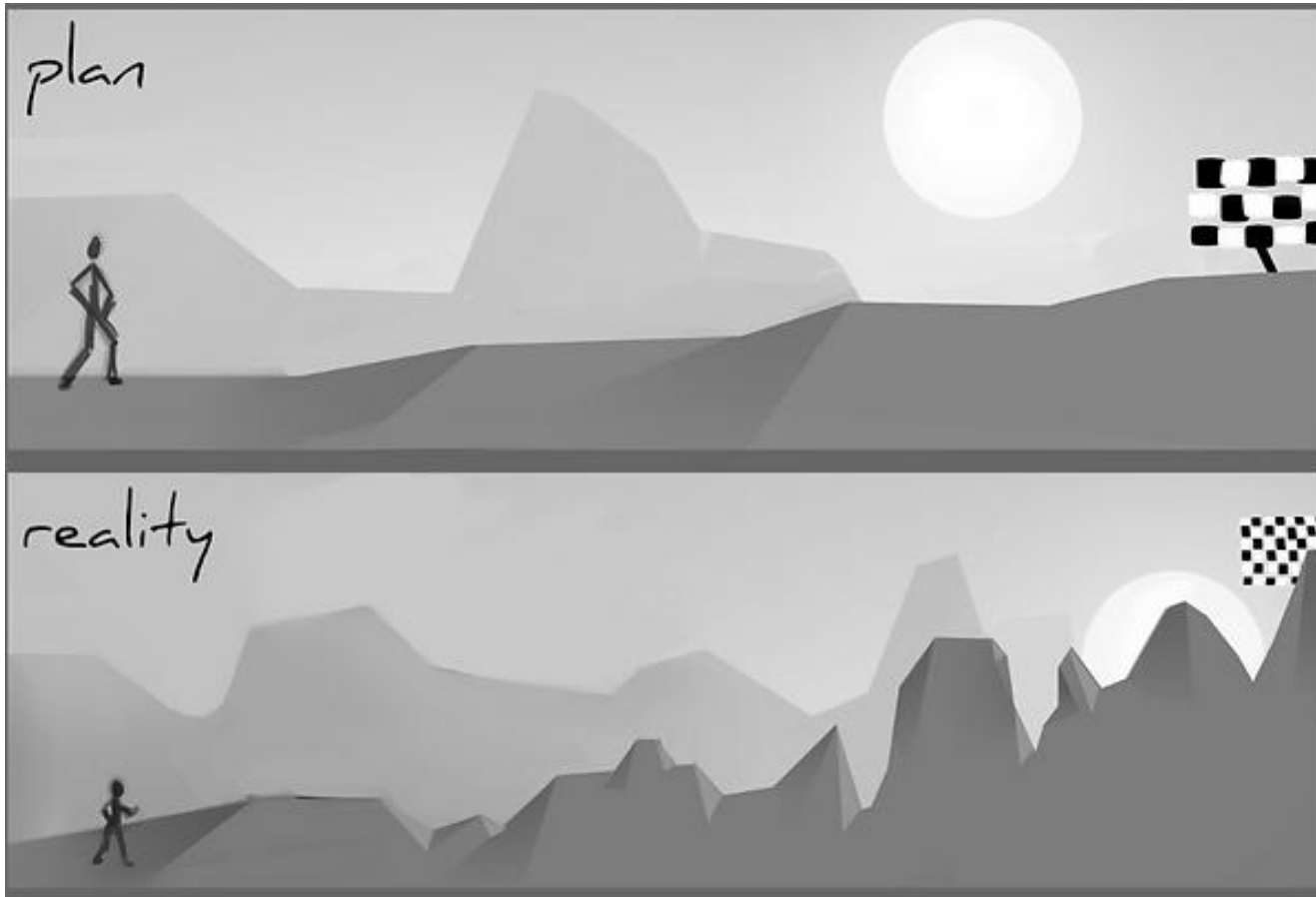
Mia's attendance is inconsistent. Mia's mum often reports that she feels unwell.

In lessons, she sometimes puts her head on the desk during written tasks.

At her new school, staff have been unable to complete baseline assessments with Mia.

Reviews and Wobble Plans

Wobbles are normal – change is hard and takes time



It may feel like things have stalled/ regressed but you can keep positive changes going long-term by knowing what has worked previously.

If you identify 'wobbles' as quickly as possible and make sure you have a plan, you will be able to get things back on track much quicker. Regular reviews and developing a **Wobble Plan** can help you with this .

Credit: Tom/ Greeniy, Spectrum Gaming member

MOVING FROM Recovery to Rediscovery

EBSA
— Horizons
Dr Jerricah Holder

1. RESPITE AND RECOVERY

2. REMOVING THE PRESSURE

3. RECONNECTING THROUGH
SAFE RELATIONSHIPS

4. REDISCOVERING THEIR
SENSE OF CURIOSITY

5. REENGAGEMENT WITH
THE WORLD

- **You can't overcome anxiety and pressure with anxiety and pressure** (Dr Naomi Fisher).
- Pressure needs to come off
- Shorten or change the focus of goals whilst maintaining links with school (even if a school return may be a long way off).
- **Sitting with a pause.** This can feel hard when nothing feels like it's happening.
- We can't give you a time frame, it will take as long as needed.

Children who have been out of school for a prolonged time and/or have experienced burnout will need a trauma-informed approach, over a longer period of time.

Top Ten Tips from Schools

1. Key adult for the child.
2. Nurture the relationship with the family.
3. Communicate needs of child to all staff.
4. Uniform adaptations.
5. Plan in school support e.g. soft starts, different entrance points, visual aids, reduced timetable.
6. Peer-to-peer support – group activities.
7. Regularly review and adapt plans.
8. Home visits.
9. One size doesn't fit all - every young person's progress will be different.
10. The process (reengaging back into school) may be small slow steps.



Missing the Mark
<https://missingthemark.blog/>

Further reading

Parent/ carer views

- Dr Naomi Fisher (clinical psychologist): [Dr Naomi Fisher | Facebook](#).
- Eliza Fricker: A parent and author of “Can’t Not Won’t” and an illustrator, who uses art to educate people on difficulties attending school: [Missing the Mark](#).
- Beth Bodycote: Creator of the parent led organisation [Not Fine in School](#) which has a network of over 46,000 families who are facing difficulties in relation to school.
- Ellie Costello from [Square Peg](#) and author of the book [Square Pegs: Inclusivity, Passion and Fitting In](#).
- Heidi Mavir (neurodivergent parent experience) [Your Child is Not Broken](#)

Recently published research:

- Boaler, R., & Bond, C. (2023). Systemic school-based approaches for supporting students with attendance difficulties: a systematic literature review. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 1-18.
- Connolly Sophie E., Constable Hannah L., Mullally Sinéad L (2023). School distress and the school attendance crisis: a story dominated by neurodivergence and unmet need. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 14.
- Corcoran, S., & Kelly, C. (2023). A meta-ethnographic understanding of children and young people's experiences of extended school non-attendance. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 23(1), 24-37.
- 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.
- Fletcher, M., Bond, C., & Qualter, P. (2023). User perspectives of robotic telepresence technology in schools: A systematic literature review. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 39(2), 117-134.
- Neilson, C. & Bond, C. (2023) After a long period of being in hibernation – these little green shoots were growing.” Lived experiences of effective support for autistic young people who have experienced extended school nonattendance. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*
- O’Hagan, S., Bond, C. & Hebron, J. (2022) Autistic girls and emotionally based school avoidance: supportive factors for successful re-engagement in mainstream high school. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*.
- Ward, Sarah – Implementing EBSA Guidance in schools –