

# Emotionally Based School Avoidance: How to get persistently absent children back into school

A guide to supporting students at risk of missing school due to social and emotional difficulties

Three action plans for schools to support primary and secondary school students at risk of avoiding school due to:

- Caring responsibilities at home
- Bullying and friendship difficulties
- Pressure to achieve in schoolwork and exams

With additional advice for supporting neurodivergent students.

With insight from practitioners at the Carnegie Centre of Excellence for Mental Health in Schools and senior mental health and wellbeing leads at:

- St Paul's C of E Primary School.
- Archbishop Temple Church of England High School.
- Jo Richardson Community School.



Archbishop Temple  
Church of England High School



## Summary

Far too many children and young people are missing out on an education and the opportunity for a bright future.

The Attendance Audit from the [Children's Commissioner](#) shows that nearly 1 in 4 children were persistently absent from school in 2022. That is 1.6 million children missing over 10% of school sessions.

The fact is many of these students *want* to learn. They are desperate to make progress and to reach their full potential. But there are complex issues which are keeping them away from school.

Research from the [Centre for Social Justice](#) suggests anxiety is the biggest driver behind the recent drop in school attendance. An increasing number of students who are absent from school are experiencing Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA).

In this guide we outline some practical steps that teachers and pastoral teams are taking to make school life better for students with EBSA so they can access the education they deserve.

## Contents

- Why is school attendance so important?
- What we know about Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA)
- How to get persistently absent students back into school
- Strategies for early intervention
- Students with caring responsibilities
- Students experiencing bullying or friendship difficulties
- Students feeling the pressure to achieve in schoolwork and exams
- Supporting neurodivergent students
- Conclusion

## Why is school attendance so important?

We instinctively know that school is the best place for children to develop a love of learning, build their social skills and lay the foundations for a happy and fulfilling life. But what are the facts and figures which support good school attendance?

<p>At the end of Key Stage 2, <b>71%</b> pupils who had 99% attendance achieved expected standards in reading, writing and maths.</p> <p>But only <b>42%</b> of children with 85% attendance achieved those expected standards.</p>	<p><a href="#">Public First: Listening to, and learning from, parents in the attendance crisis</a></p>
<p><b>78%</b> of all children who were rarely absent in Years 10 and 11 passed at least 5 GCSEs including English and maths.</p> <p>But only <b>36%</b> of children who were persistently absent in both years reached this same standard.</p>	<p><a href="#">The Children’s Commissioner: Missing Children, Missing Grades</a></p>
<p>Every moment in school counts, and days missed add up quickly.</p> <p>For example, a child in Year 10 who is absent for three days over a half term could miss <b>15 lessons</b> in total – that’s a lot of essential learning.</p>	<p><a href="#">Gov.co.uk: The Education Hub</a></p>
<p>The social and emotional benefits of school are harder to quantify. But when schools were closed to most students during the Covid-19 lockdowns, children’s development was hampered by the lack of social interaction that school provides.</p>	<p><a href="#">The Institute for Fiscal Studies</a></p>

## What we know about Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA)

EBSA is not the same as truanting. Students are not choosing to stay away from school, they are unable to engage with school due to emotional factors. As these factors are rarely straightforward, children experiencing EBSA are likely to be absent from school for long periods of time.

And the longer a child is away from school, the harder it is for them to return.

**“When a child has been off school for a length of time, they often worry that everyone will look at them and ask where they have been – even if it’s meant in a friendly way. Often, they don’t want to talk about it, they just want to carry on as they were before.”** Kerry Bridges, mental health and wellbeing lead, Archbishop Temple Church of England High School.

When a child has been absent for some time, it becomes more challenging for schools to get them back into a good pattern of attendance. In a child’s mind, school starts to represent something to fear, and that fear grows greater and needs patience and expertise to overcome.

However, there are some strategies schools can use to encourage students who have been missing from school for a long time to make a positive return to school.

## How to get persistently absent students back into school

When a student has been absent for some time, getting them back to school is a significant challenge, and the steps schools take will vary widely from one child to the next – it's a truly bespoke approach.

Schools are taking a range of strategies to encourage students back into school.

### 1. Get students into the building

The biggest hurdle is walking through the school doors. Once a child is back in the building, that's when the recovery can begin. Invite children into school outside normal school hours for a non-learning activity, for example a wellbeing workshop. Encourage a student to come into a non-threatening school space such as a café, outside area or sports hall. Provide students with safe landings such as a comfortable spot in the library or a quiet classroom.

### 2. Ask what students don't like about school

Some children find certain areas in school challenging, for instance the busy corridors, playgrounds or canteens. Create a back-to-school plan which allows a child to leave a lesson five minutes early so they can get to their next lesson before the crowds, or provide quieter spaces where children can eat their lunch.

### 3. Involve the parents

Parents are critical to tackling EBSA, both at the primary and secondary stage. Some parents had a poor experience of school themselves, so invite them into the school and show them your school is a friendly, supportive environment and the best place for their child to be.

**“Some parents are honest about their own anxieties so we provide a community hub within the school with a trainee education mental health practitioner who supports parents with parenting skills and helps them put strategies in place to support their child's education.”** Philippa Turton, mental health and wellbeing lead, St Paul's C of E Primary School.

### 4. Find tailored solutions

The emotional issues behind EBSA are many and varied, so schools need to be prepared to tailor their strategies to the individual. Make sure their back-to-school plan has realistic steps they can manage, whether it's only ten minutes a day, or half a day a week to start with. Some students need more time on each step than others, but the main thing is they are moving in the right direction.

**“We have good links with West Ham United. One of their hub officers comes into school in full kit and helps with student mentoring. It works really well for some students who find one-to-one counselling across the table difficult. Sometimes they go outside and play football and that can open up a conversation.”** Olivia Draisey, head of Year 11 and senior mental health and wellbeing Lead, Jo Richardson Community School.

## Strategies for early intervention

There are many children who may still be attending school but are starting to miss some school sessions and appear to be at risk from avoiding school altogether. This is a critical moment for schools to take action and make essential adjustments to show students that their school is a supportive environment where they can learn and flourish.

There are many, complex reasons that a young person becomes at risk from EBSA. In this guide we look at three of the most common causes of EBSA:

1. Students with caring responsibilities
2. Bullying and friendship difficulties
3. Pressure to achieve in schoolwork and exams

And we explore some practical strategies schools can use to support these students and keep them coming to school.

### 1. Students with caring responsibilities

**Over a quarter of young carers aged 11-15 regularly miss school and 23% of young carers in the UK say their caring role has stopped them making friends.** [Action for Children](#)

For many children and young people, the end of the school day doesn't mean time to hang out with friends, do a spot of gaming or get some homework done. Young carers have many roles from accompanying a parent to a hospital appointment to practical tasks such as housework, cooking and shopping.

Sometimes students or their families can be reluctant to share their situation with the school, which is why school staff have to tread carefully if they suspect a child's caring responsibilities are keeping them away from school.

Students with caring responsibilities can have multiple challenges which put them at risk of EBSA:

- Concern about an unwell parent or relative
- Tiredness and physical symptoms as a result of caring duties
- Stress caused by managing multiple household tasks
- A lack of understanding from their peers and a fear of feeling different
- Worries about falling behind with homework and missing lessons
- Uncertainty due to an unpredictable home environment
- Anxiety about not having the correct uniform or equipment because of financial difficulties

However, there are some effective ways schools can support children with caring responsibilities.

### How can schools help?



#### Raise awareness of the situation

It's important to keep relevant colleagues informed but always check the student is happy for you to share the fact they are a young carer with other staff members. Where possible,

involve families and other agencies and professionals in discussions about ways the student can combine their caregiving duties with their learning.

**“Young carers need somebody to talk to them, to show them we understand they have a heavy mental load and to let them know they are doing something important rather than being a burden to the school.”** Kerry Bridges, mental health and wellbeing lead, Archbishop Temple Church of England High School.



#### **Allow students to contact home**

If the student is worried about an ill parent at home or a relative in hospital, give them the opportunity to check in on them during the day. Allow them to call home using the office phone or their own phone depending on school policy. Some schools give students special passports which permit them to make calls during the day. For secondary school students, ensure all their subject teachers know the student may need to leave class to make or receive a call from home.



#### **Be flexible around homework**

A child's home situation might make it difficult to get homework done, so provide some leeway for when homework must be handed in, and explore ways to offer a quiet space where a student can complete homework during breaks or free periods. If the student hasn't been able to prepare for a school test, allow them to sit the test at a later date when they have had the chance to revise.

**“We try to be proactive and let a child's teachers know they might not manage their homework that week rather than waiting for the child to tell us they are going to struggle.”** Kerry Bridges, mental health and wellbeing lead, Archbishop Temple Church of England High School.



#### **Provide opportunities for a break**

A student might be involved in caring responsibilities at night, making them too tired for school. Offer the opportunity for a break during the school day if they need it, or a quiet space to rest and re-charge. Give the student a discreet way to alert their teacher if they need some time away from the classroom, such as a colour coded card or wrist band.



#### **Allow flexible school hours**

When caring responsibilities conflict with school hours it can cause anxiety. Make reasonable adjustments such as allowing a student to start school slightly later or to leave early so they have time to take a sibling to school, or attend a hospital appointment with a parent.

**“We hold a lot of after school intervention classes for GCSE students. A student who can't make the session because of a caring responsibility might avoid coming into school at all that day. In**

**that situation we would put something else in place for that student.”** Olivia Draisey, head of Year 11 and senior mental health and wellbeing Lead, Jo Richardson Community School.



### Help carers be children again

Being a young carer can be hard, so make time for some fun. It can really help children to meet other young people who are in the same situation. Point the student in the direction of organisations which can help young carers such as [Carers Trust](#), [Barnados Young Carers](#) or [Carers UK](#)

**“Last year we had about eight young carers at school. Our local authority put on some activities which they could join in and as a school we held events for those young carers and arranged drop-ins so we could talk through their challenges with their families.”** Philippa Turton, mental health and wellbeing lead, St Paul’s C of E Primary School.

## EBSA scenario 1: How to help a student combine schoolwork with caring

### The situation

A student in Year 11 lives with her mother, a single parent who has mobility issues and needs help with shopping, cooking and cleaning the house. The student often has to leave school early to collect her mother’s medication from the pharmacy.

Teachers are concerned the student is falling behind and not completing homework tasks on time. The student had previously been on track to do well in her GCSEs but her internal assessment grades have started to slip.

### Action plan

- Arrange a video call with the student and her mother so they can join from home and explore ideas together to support the student.
- Give the student access to a study space during tutor time and breaks so she can catch up with homework.
- Help the student prioritise her homework and grant her extensions where possible.
- Work with the student to design a realistic revision timetable.
- Provide recordings or links to lessons which the student misses when she leaves early.

## 2. Students experiencing bullying or friendship difficulties

The [Anti-Bullying Alliance](#) estimates the proportion of pupils who were absent from school due to anxiety or mental health problems was higher among pupils that had been a victim of bullying – 32% compared with 16% of pupils that had not been bullied.

When a child is bullied at school, it has an impact on their wellbeing, confidence and ability to learn and can affect their entire childhood experience. Victims of bullying are not avoiding school, they are avoiding the bullies and trying to stay safe.

One thing schools need to be clear about is what bullying is – and what it isn't – because students and parents can sometimes use the term incorrectly, for instance when referring to a breakdown in relationships. When you define what bullying is, everyone understands how and why the school is addressing it.

Students experiencing bullying or friendship difficulties may be at risk of EBSA due to:

- Worries about staying safe from physical threats, theft or damage to property
- Feelings of loneliness or isolation when excluded from friendship groups
- Low self-esteem due to name calling and unkind remarks
- Inability to focus on schoolwork due to anxiety around bullying
- Not wanting to attend certain lessons or activities because a bully will be there
- Shame about finding themselves a target for bullies
- Stress related health issues such as headaches and stomach aches.

However, children who are suffering from bullying and friendships difficulties can find a safe, supportive environment at school.



#### Talk about bullying

Implement a firm, whole-school approach to bullying, with open conversations about relationships. Encourage students to speak out if they are suffering, and urge witnesses to report incidents too. Hold regular anti-bullying assemblies to discourage children from unkind behaviour which can escalate into bullying, and help to reduce the stigma for those who are targeted.

**“We follow a programme called [‘No Outsiders’](#). It runs all the way from Early Years to Year 6 and focuses on equality according to race, gender, ethnicity and religion and helps children understand that nobody should be treated differently or left out of friendships.”** Philippa Turton, mental health and wellbeing lead, St Paul’s C of E Primary School.



#### Have a clear bullying policy

Ensure there are set procedures for dealing with bullying which everyone understands. Share these with students and parents so that children know how to report incidents, where they can get support and what the consequences are.

**“If a child is at home and feeling nervous about going to school, they can report an incident on an app called Imabi, and the information goes straight to our safeguarding team. It’s a good way for a child to share something they haven’t felt able to tell anyone about at school.”** Olivia Draisey, head of Year 11 and senior mental health and wellbeing Lead, Jo Richardson Community School.





### Establish the facts

Bullying can cover a whole spectrum of activity, some serious, some less so. If a child reports a bullying incident, take time to find out what is happening so you can take the best course of action. Where bullying takes the form of conflict between students or groups, listen to both sides and encourage everyone to reflect on the issues and how they can be resolved.

**“Children can use very emotive language. A student might say they are being bullied when in fact they have fallen out with somebody and it’s a situation which can easily be solved. We can’t force children to be friends when they don’t want to be, but we do teach them good social skills.”** Kerry Bridges, mental health and wellbeing lead, Archbishop Temple Church of England High School.



### Create safe spaces

Feeling unsafe from physical or emotional threats is a key trigger for EBSA so if children have somewhere safe they can go they are more likely to come into school. Provide spaces where students can spend breaks and lunchtimes either for quiet time or for organised activities.

If a child is anxious about bullying, try to arrange for them to have lunch at a time when they feel safe. Ensure there is some adult presence in those areas where bullying often takes place – the playground, toilets and corridors.



### Encourage peer support

Students don’t always want to approach an adult with an issue, sometimes they prefer to talk to someone of their own age. Peer mentoring can be remarkably effective so consider having nominated students who children can go to for help and advice, and provide these students with training in supporting their peers.

Find out what your school community thinks about bullying by conducting student voice and parent voice surveys.

**“We have prefects who support adults who are supervising the areas such as the yard. They support children who look vulnerable and also those who need a little help with making friends.”** Kerry Bridges, mental health and wellbeing lead, Archbishop Temple Church of England High School.



### Make lessons conflict free

Students often miss school because they want to avoid a specific lesson or activity because of bullying. If you are aware a child is having difficulty with a particular student or group of students, keep them separate in class. Rearrange your classroom seating plans and ask relevant subject teachers to do the same. Ensure those students do not carry out group work together or collaborate directly on projects.

If a child is unwilling to ask or answer a question in class for fear of being bullied, give them another way to show they understand a topic or need some help. A colour-coded card or visual symbol they can point to can work well.



### Encourage positive friendships

Giving children the tools to make good relationships can pre-empt bullying and keep children engaged with school. For primary school children, give them the language they need to initiate friendships and ask if they can join in with a game. At secondary stage, initiate discussions about how to develop resilience, be a good digital citizen and interact positively on social channels.

**“If we have a new child joining us, or there’s a child who finds it harder to make friends, we use a technique called [Circle of Friends](#) to support them and give them a sense of belonging.”**

Philippa Turton, mental health and wellbeing lead, St Paul’s C of E Primary School.

## EBSA Scenario 2: How to help a primary school child manage friendships

### The situation

A parent of a Year 5 pupil phoned the school to say their child was unwell and couldn’t attend school. The child’s teacher remembered the child had been rather withdrawn in class recently and hadn’t been spending time with his usual group of friends. The teaching assistant had noticed this too.

The teacher decided to give the boy’s parent a call and it turned out that he wasn’t physically unwell but too upset to come in to school. The other children in the class were leaving him out of their games at playtime.

### Action plan

- Talk to the child to find out what has been going wrong for them and break time, and what they would like to happen.
- Use circle time to talk about why it’s important to treat others as you would like to be treated.
- Introduce some role play activities which help children learn how to interact with others and be a good friend.
- Ask one of the other children to be a break or lunchtime buddy for the child.

## 3. Students feeling the pressure to achieve in schoolwork and exams

Students often feel high levels of stress about their academic performance. In some cases, young people put themselves under pressure, while for others it’s the weight of family expectations that makes them anxious to achieve. This anxiety can manifest itself in physical symptoms of illness, causing absences from school and making it even harder to keep up with the work.

Teachers and school leaders are also under pressure to ensure their students get good results, and while they strive not to let this have a negative impact on their students, it can still lead to a strained environment for everybody.

Even some of those students who do not appear to be worried about getting good results could be experiencing anxiety, and their way of coping is to disengage from school altogether.

Anxiety about homework, lessons and exams can put students at risk of EBSA:

- Desire to avoid a particular subject they find difficult or teacher they find challenging
- Worries about missed learning and feeling it will be impossible to catch up
- Fear of disappointing parents, relatives and themselves
- Anxiety about being moved down a set and not being with friends
- Fear of being considered too keen to work hard
- Not wanting to get answers wrong in class in front of teachers or peers
- Inability to complete homework correctly and on time
- Worries about getting the grades needed for future studies and careers.

Schools can help students stay mentally and physically healthy so they keep coming to school and performing at their best.



#### **Break the cycle of missed learning**

When a child starts to miss school because they are stressed about schoolwork, they lose even more learning and they worry even more. Try not to focus on the missed time, instead indicate the essential learning they need to do to catch up.

Work with students to create a realistic home learning plan and help them manage their time effectively rather than overloading them with a backlog of tasks.



#### **Normalise stress**

Stress levels can rise at certain times in the school calendar such as high stakes exams or end of year assessments. Explain to students that a certain level of stress is completely normal and if handled well can even help them perform better. Being anxious in this situation does not necessarily mean they suffer from anxiety.

**“When it gets closer to exam time, we run mental health workshops and recommend webinars about exam stress which are useful for students and their parents to watch because parents often feel the pressure when their child is taking exams.”** Olivia Draisey, head of Year 11 and senior mental health and wellbeing Lead, Jo Richardson Community School.



#### **Help students with change**

Moving up through school can be a trigger for EBSA, particularly if students don't feel they are performing as well as they could or getting the same results as their friends.

Help Year 6 children get ready for transition by showing them what to expect at their new school. Reassure them that their new teachers are there to help them get where they need to be. Support

secondary school children in making realistic plans for the next step in their studies or career, and help them understand what they need to do to get there.



### Keep everyone well

Stress and anxiety can make students unwell and set them on the path of school absence. Remind everyone to prioritise healthy food, exercise and sleep, and encourage children to continue with the activities they enjoy.

**“We often see students feeling sick and getting headaches around the time of a big test and it’s worrying if they don’t come in. When children are at home it all seems overwhelming, but at school they have a good support network and can see other people going through the same things as them.”** Kerry Bridges, mental health and wellbeing lead, Archbishop Temple Church of England High School.



### Focus on strengths, not deficits

Some students react badly to feedback which is designed to help them improve. So it’s important to emphasise a child’s strengths and what is going well before moving on to the areas for development.

Reassure a student that although they haven’t reached their target mark yet they are taking important steps towards it. Make sure the conversation in the classroom is positive and pick up on those [automatic negative thoughts \(ANTs\)](#) which are damaging to a student’s confidence.

## EBSA scenario 3: How to help a secondary school student who is anxious about their learning

### The situation

A student in Year 10 with a good attendance record was starting to miss school. At first it was one session here and there, but as time went on the absences got longer, and the more school she missed, the more anxious she became about falling behind.

When the head of year asked for the reasons behind these absences, the student explained she was avoiding maths lessons – a subject she found challenging – but in doing that she was creating gaps in her other subjects too.

### Action plan

- Put interventions in place to help the student build stronger foundations in maths
- Create a homework plan for the rest of the term to help the student catch up
- Find the student a sixth form maths mentor to help with questions and exam techniques
- Praise the student for the excellent work she produced in her other subjects

## Supporting neurodivergent students

The strategies which help neurotypical children who are at risk of EBSA are also likely to be effective for children with SEND. However, neurodivergent children may have additional challenges which schools need to address.

### 1. Reduce sensory overload

Find out which sensory stimuli cause sensory difficulties for students and make adjustments where possible. For example, dimming the classroom lights or closing the windows to reduce noise from outside. Allow the student to come into the school office rather than waiting in a busy corridor.

### 2. Help students through difficult times of day

If a child finds unstructured times like registration or breaktimes difficult, find them a task or errand such as handing out books, watering plants or taking a file to the office. Provide organised activities or a buddy system to make lunchtimes easier.

### 3. Support emotional literacy

Neurodiverse children may find it harder to explain how they are feeling, so explore resources which can help them express and interpret emotions. Investigate staff training to address specific challenges, but always ensure this training is consistent across your school staff so everyone adopts the same approach.

**“Zones of regulation, which organise feelings into different coloured zones, are a good way for children to tell us how they are feeling. We encourage families to use them at home as well to help children with self-regulation.”** Philippa Turton, mental health and wellbeing lead, St Paul’s C of E Primary School.

### 4. Promote understanding of differences

Children with SEND may start to avoid school because they feel judged or isolated which can lead to them hiding or masking their differences. Promote a whole-school approach to understanding and respecting differences through the curriculum as well as in assemblies and workshops.

### 5. Remove barriers to learning

If student finds a particular subject or curriculum area difficult to access, check in with them on a regular basis to make sure they feel confident in their leaning. Make sure all staff are fully trained and up-to-date with techniques to identify and cater for additional needs, and share best practice across the school.

## Conclusion

With so many children and young people experiencing EBSA, schools have to find innovative ways to help these students back to the classroom. It’s not a straightforward challenge because each child faces different barriers which keep them away from school.

However, understanding of the impact of emotional issues on school attendance is growing, and schools are developing effective strategies to support students at risk of EBSA and to help those already severely absent to re-engage with school.

By making reasonable adjustments, schools can help children with caring responsibilities combine schoolwork with caring. Children who are experiencing bullying can be encouraged to stay in school as long as they feel safe, supported and listened to. And schools can teach students to manage the pressure to achieve by focusing on the positive.

A combination of empathetic school policies and tailored solutions can combat EBSA and create an environment where children look forward to spending every day, building positive relationships and making progress in their learning.

#### [About Carnegie Centre of Excellence for Mental Health in Schools](#)

The Carnegie Centre of Excellence for Mental Health in Schools is focused on evidence-based solutions which address the needs of schools, pupils, parents and carers. We help develop professional communities of school mental health leads and support leading innovation to strengthen the mental health of the next generation at all levels of education across the UK.

We work with schools, organisations and professionals committed to ensuring that mental health difficulties do not limit success at school and beyond.

#### **With thanks to:**

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- Olivia Draisey, head of Year 11 and senior mental health and wellbeing Lead, Jo Richardson Community School.
- Philippa Turton, mental health and wellbeing lead, St Paul's C of E Primary School.

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