Essex County Council
Education

LET'S TALK... We Miss You

Best practice and guidance for maximising school attendance

including emotionally based school avoidance

"Improving attendance is everyone's business. The barriers to accessing education are wide and complex, both within and beyond the school gates, and are often specific to individual pupils and families. The foundation of securing good attendance is that school is a calm, orderly, safe, and supportive environment where all pupils want to be and are keen and ready to learn."

Contents

Please note that the terms 'school', 'pupil' and 'CYP' are used throughout this guidance for consistency. However, the content is relevant to all children, young people and staff within any educational setting, including early years, enhanced provision and further education.

Foreword

Central to raising standards in education and ensuring all pupils can fulfil their potential is an assumption so widely understood that it is insufficiently stated – pupils need to attend school regularly to benefit from their education. Missing out on lessons leaves children vulnerable to falling behind. High school attendance is essential for pupils to get the most out of their school experience, including their attainment, wellbeing, and wider life chances. "The pupils with the highest attainment at the end of key stage 2 and key stage 4 have higher rates of attendance over the key stage compared to those with the lowest attainment." DfE May 2022.

This guidance is designed to provide school staff and other professionals with a first port of call toolkit for preventing pupil absence and identifying and supporting children and young people (CYP) who have attendance difficulties, therefore reducing the need for statutory intervention. It shares key elements of theory and good practice, as well as some practical tools which school staff and other professionals can use where there are concerns about attendance. Statutory legal intervention should only be considered where school-based strategies have not satisfactorily resolved concerns.

This guidance has been developed in the context of Trauma Perceptive Practice (TPP), the Essex approach to understanding behaviour and supporting emotional wellbeing. The values of TPP enable schools/settings to view and review the experiences of the child/young person (CYP) through compassion and kindness, hope, connection and belonging. The mindset of these values influence policy and practice to ensure we provide an educational experience that provides these values.

For more information about TPP please see here:

schools.essex.gov.uk/pupils/SEND/Pages/SEMH---Trauma-Perceptive-Practice.aspx

Alongside this guidance, please also refer to:

- School Attendance Guidance: Attendance Specialist Team - Essential Guidance

- ECC Education Access Team Medical Policy: School Absence Medical Policy

- ECC Provision Guidance: schools.essex.gov.uk/pupils/SEND/Pages/Provision-Guidance.aspx

- One Planning Guidance: send.essex.gov.uk/help-learning/make-plan-action-support-your-child

- Keeping Children Safe in Education (DfE): www.gov.uk/government/publications/keeping-children-safe-in-education--2

For further support you can contact the Attendance Specialist Team, the Education Access Service or your school's link Educational Psychologist (EP) or Inclusion Partner (IP).

Introduction

This Essex approach 'We Miss You' has been written as best practice guidance for education staff and other professionals to support this expectation. The latest Department for Education guidance (May 2022) 'Working together to improve school attendance' makes it very clear that a coherent joined up approach to attendance will be helpful.

> "Improving attendance is everyone's business. The barriers to accessing education are wide and complex, both within and beyond the school gates, and are often specific to individual pupils and families. The foundation of securing good attendance is that school is a calm, orderly, safe, and supportive environment where all pupils want to be and are keen and ready to learn. Some pupils find it harder than others to attend school and therefore at all stages of improving attendance, schools and partners should work with pupils and parents to remove any barriers to attendance by building strong and trusting relationships and working together to put the right support in place. Securing good attendance cannot therefore be seen in isolation, and effective practices for improvement will involve close interaction with schools' efforts on curriculum, behaviour, bullying, special educational needs support, pastoral and mental health and wellbeing, and effective use of resources, including pupil premium. It cannot solely be the preserve of a single member of staff, or organisation, it must be a concerted effort across all teaching and non-teaching staff in school, the trust or governing body, the local authority, and other local partners."

From page 6

www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-together-to-improve-school-attendance

School Attendance Difficulties

Literature has typically referred to prolonged absence from schools as 'school refusal'. Pupils with school attendance difficulties are often described using labels such as 'school phobic' or 'truant', terms which are now considered outdated. These terms also mean different things to different people. The lack of a shared understanding and language is often a barrier to finding effective interventions for CYP.

In Essex, our preferred terminology is School Attendance Difficulties, which is used to encompass the communicating behaviours of any pupil who struggles to attend or stay in school/education setting for any reason. This term is consistent with other terminology used in education to describe the needs of pupils e.g. literacy difficulties, social communication difficulties. The attendance difficulties could occur occasionally, sporadically, regularly or persistently.

Any terminology that is more specific should only be used to describe a pupil's absence where a thorough assessment has taken place to determine what is causing and maintaining their absence from school.

Care must be taken not to attribute cause or motivations which are unknown or misleading. For example, the term 'refusal' is increasingly seen as unhelpful as it suggests a wilfulness on the part of an anxious pupil which can obscure the underlying cause.

Children can be absent from school for a variety of reasons, the main reason being usual childhood illnesses. However, there is a group of children and young people whose reluctance to attend school becomes so entrenched due to emotional factors that they often experience lengthy absences from school. This is known as Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) – however, it is important to note that EBSA isn't a medical condition in itself.

Our preference for the term EBSA, is derived from the psychological processes that underpin anxiety and the cycle of avoidance when a stress response has been triggered. The "avoidance" part of this terminology is positioned as a self-protective strategy to cope or remove oneself from stressful or distressing situations. EBSA is also considered on a continuum, recognising a child's EBSA needs regardless of their current attendance status and emphasises that children and young people can be experiencing EBSA and still be attending school consistently. Research shows that children and young people who miss school in this way are at risk of poor academic attainment, reduced social opportunities and limited employment opportunities. It can also be associated with poor adult mental health.

Emotionally-Based School Avoidance

The term Emotionally-Based School Avoidance (EBSA) is widely used now to describe occasions where it has been established through assessment that a pupil's absence is because of an emotional distress e.g. anxiety. EBSA doesn't just mean not attending school entirely. Staff may also observe children and young people:

- not going to their classroom

- not staying in class

- not attending some lessons

- avoiding some physical spaces or people.

Why does EBSA happen?

There is no one reason why children and young people avoid school. It varies by individual and is usually caused by a combination of various factors and their interaction, rather than a single cause. Potential risk factors for EBSA can be split into three main categories: the child or young person, the family and home, and the school.
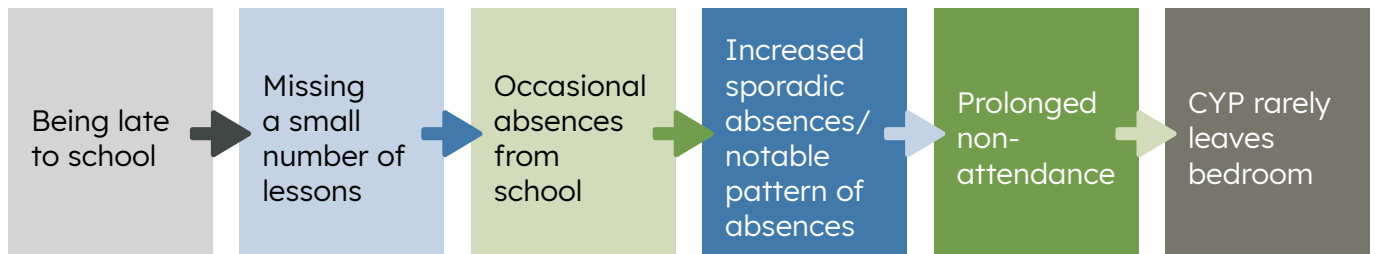
An important way of identifying and supporting CYP at risk of EBSA is to consider any risk and protective factors.

A protective factor can be defined as:

"a characteristic at the biological, psychological, family, or community (including peers and culture) level that is associated with a lower likelihood of problem outcomes or that reduces the negative impact of a risk factor on problem outcomes." (This can also be thought of as a resilience factor).

Risk and Protective Factors

School attendance difficulties may start gradually. This can make it hard to spot when things are beginning to go wrong. It is easier to make change if you intervene early, at the first sign of difficulties. The chart below shows the different stages that a young person can move through. It is important to note that not all CYPs will start from the far left.

| Being late to school | → | Missing a small number of lessons | → | Occasional absences from school | → | Increased sporadic absences/ notable pattern of absences | → | Prolonged non-attendance | → | CYP rarely leaves bedroom |

Any terminology that is more specific should only be used to describe a pupil's absence where a thorough assessment has taken place to determine what is causing and maintaining their absence from school.

Care must be taken not to attribute cause or motivations which are unknown or misleading (the term 'refusal' is increasingly seen as unhelpful as it suggests a wilfulness on the part of an anxious pupil which can obscure the underlying cause).

Some examples of EBSA risk factors could include:

Child/young person	Family/home	School
Anxiety, depression or other mental health concerns	High levels of family stress (including financial stress, conflict or domestic violence)	Bullying
Difficulties with managing and regulating emotions	Changes to the home environment (including divorce, separation or parent/carer illness)	Difficult relationships with staff members
Trauma and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)	Being a young carer	Difficulties making and maintaining friendships, being socially isolated
Low levels of self-confidence or self-esteem	Loss and bereavement	Difficulties in particular subjects
Separation anxiety or attachment issues with a parent/carer	Family history of EBSA	Demanding, pressurised academic environment
Having a special educational need or disability	Poor parental mental health	Transitions: from primary to secondary, or through key stages

Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families

General principles

These seven principles are important to bear in mind when supporting children with attendance difficulties:

1. Intervene early

2. Work with the family throughout

3. Actively involve the CYP in discussions about their needs and what support they require

4. Develop an action plan based on a personalised and holistic approach

5. Review the plan regularly

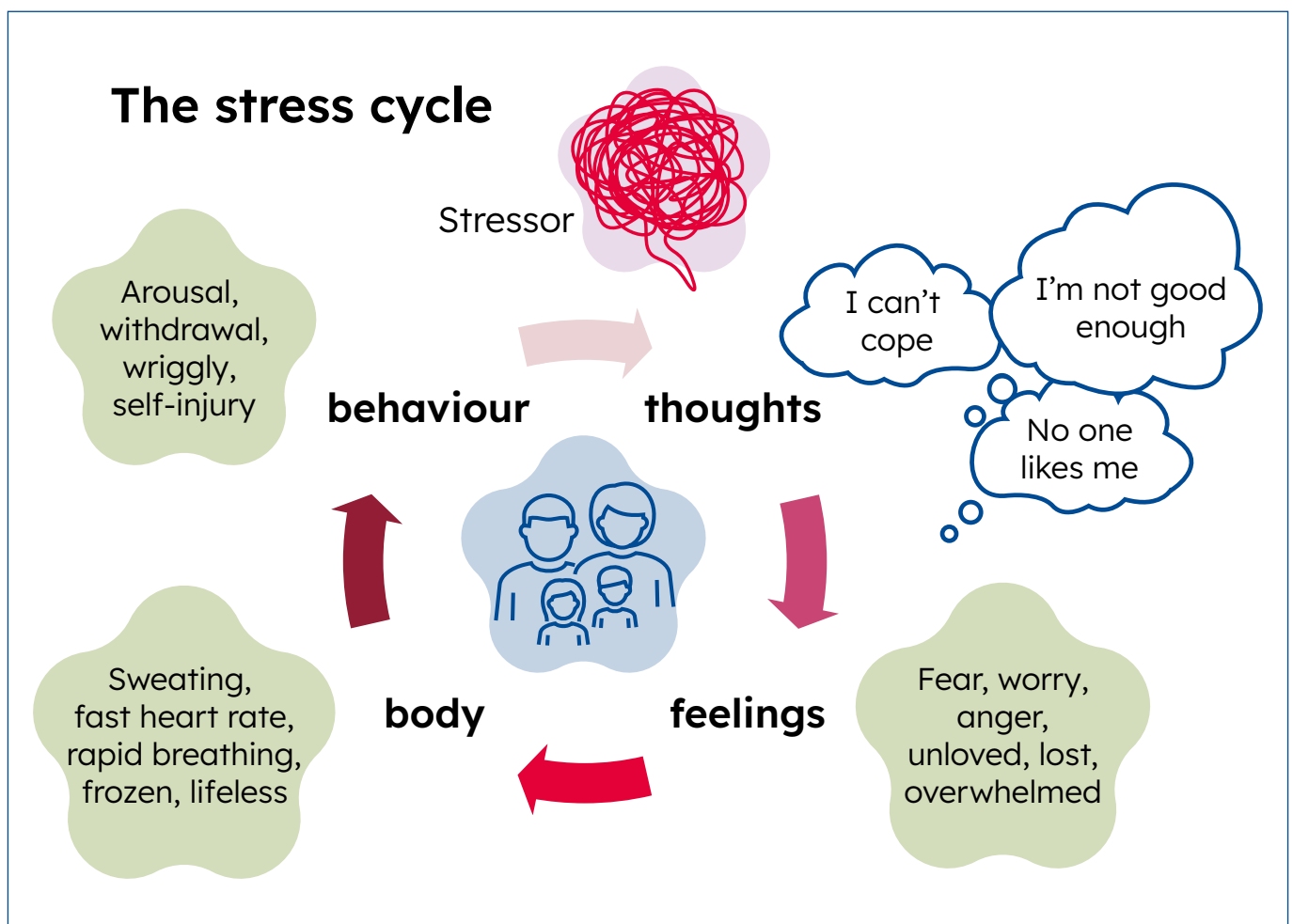6. Accept that the journey will not be smooth

7. Involve external professionals if initial attempts to get the CYP back into school have not been successful

Frameworks for understanding EBSA

Everyone experiences anxiety and often anxiety is a healthy and helpful response. People feel anxious when they believe they are under threat. When someone thinks something bad is going to happen, their bodies release adrenaline which helps them prepare to physically deal with the threat by running away or fighting. This is the stress response. These chemicals cause physical sensations in their body, such as sweating, a dry mouth, a fluttering tummy and a fast heartbeat.

However, sometimes we think things are dangerous, even when they are not. Our stress response system is very rapid when we think we are in danger. When this happens, our body produces adrenaline just as if the danger was real. This is a false alarm as there is no real danger and we don't need to run away or fight. The physical sensation is uncomfortable, but it is temporary and harmless. When we feel anxious sensations in our bodies, we naturally want to avoid the situation that is triggering the anxiety. But every time we avoid the thing that we are worried about, it reinforces the belief that we need to avoid the scary thing to make ourselves feel safe. We do not get the chance to learn that we are able to cope or that the situation is rarely as bad as we think it will be.

The diagram below shows how our thoughts, physical sensations and behaviours interact in an anxious situation.

The stress cycle

Stressor

I can't cope

I'm not good enough

No one likes me

behaviour — **thoughts**

body — **feelings**

Arousal, withdrawal, wriggly, self-injury

Sweating, fast heart rate, rapid breathing, frozen, lifeless

Fear, worry, anger, unloved, lost, overwhelmed

A certain level of anxiety is a good thing, such as when taking an exam or attending an interview. However, too much anxiety can act as a barrier to a CYP engaging in developmentally appropriate tasks. The start of school avoidance is thought to occur when:

- A CYP's feelings of stress exceed those of support

- The risks of a CYP developing EBSA are greater than the resilience factors

- The 'pull' factors that promote a CYP's attendance difficulties overcome the 'push' factors that encourage their attendance.

If not addressed, anxious feelings about school can become entrenched in a cycle of avoidance. The diagram shows how anxious thoughts and feelings cause the CYP to avoid school. The immediate reduction in anxiety that results from the CYP not attending school can end up reinforcing their desire to avoid school. This then increases the anxious feelings about school and in turn, the school avoidance.

Peaks in non-attendance are particularly associated with key transitions, so it is important to pay attention to attendance at these points in particular. For example:

- At the start or end of a new school year

- Prior to or following school holidays

- At the start of each new week. Schools/settings need to be proactive in monitoring attendance and noticing any patterns that arise. It would also be helpful to look out for signs of anxiety in CYPs where there are some concerns regarding their attendance.

A whole school approach

Schools are complex organisations which make innumerable demands on their pupils. Pupils who have school attendance difficulties typically have a constellation of contributory factors which will include individual, home, school and community factors.

The school environment is likely to constitute both risk and protective factors:

- Protective factors may include inclusive ethos which include the values of compassion and kindness, hope, connection and belonging, caring form tutor/teacher, senior member of staff with knowledge of attendance and emotional wellbeing, strong safeguarding practice, effective anti-bullying procedures, etc.

- Risk factors may include high turn-over of teaching staff, lack of friends/relationships maintained through transitions, lack of/ineffective differentiation in teaching and learning, etc.

To maximise attendance in schools, a number of strategies can be employed to help improve each pupil's quality of education, and therefore their experience. School leaders can focus on raising expectations for high attendance by implementing policies, procedures and targets. This works most effectively when the policy is assigned to the whole school, whilst the targets are set according to individual circumstances.

Whole school ethos

For attendance to be managed effectively all staff must maintain the same attendance ethos and be actively involved in promoting and supporting pupils towards excellent attendance. Driven by the head teacher through all layers of staff, attendance should be a whole school focus and be mentioned and referred to regularly, for example:

• Attendance-focussed assemblies for all year groups at the start of the academic year help to explain expectations early and set targets

• Weekly updates on attendance in assemblies help to re-enforce the importance of excellent attendance and maintains momentum and focus

• Regular bulletins and newsletters that include attendance information reminding parents/carers that the school is focussed on and values attendance in relation to their children's education and personal development

• Including attendance information at open evenings, parents' evenings, in reception areas, corridors and classrooms helps to project the message that good attendance is vital, and the school is working hard to improve attendance and the outcomes of their pupils.

Reference: The Wakefield EBSA Guidance Document

A great place to be

One of the best ways to prevent attendance difficulties is to ensure that school is a safe place where pupils feel valued and are keen to be. When they feel happy and safe, physically and emotionally, pupils engage. This leads to higher attendance and higher academic achievement.

• Ensure that children and young people have a sense of connection and belonging with the school community

• Build an engaging calendar of events that motivates pupils to come to school and participate in fun and educational experiences

• Implement positive engagement interventions, social and emotional learning, and other culture-oriented programs

• Ensure that there is good-quality teaching and learning across all classrooms, with appropriate differentiation for pupils with additional needs

Teaching and learning

High quality inclusive teaching and effective differentiation across the curriculum can ensure that most pupils experience success as a learner on a daily basis. Ensuring that children and young people feel motivated in their learning and included within lessons can prevent attendance difficulties from developing.

Attendance policy

A school's attendance policy is the most important document for managing school attendance effectively and consistently. An attendance policy should be robust, relevant and fit for purpose. It should be directive and contain detailed information relating to pupil and parental/carer expectations for all attendance and punctuality requirements. It should also link to the safeguarding policies and practice, as this underpins everything.

• Attendance policies must reference the law with regards to school attendance, including the possible sanctions that can be applied, however it is crucial to ensure that parents/carers feel supported and able to request help if difficulties arise

• Attendance policies should be reviewed annually to ensure that all information remains relevant, and the final version should be agreed by the School Governors and the Senior Leadership Team before publishing

• Attendance policies should be available via the school's website and in paper form on request

• School attendance is a matter of law and therefore the policy needs to be transparent and clear

• A 'pupil friendly' version is always advisable because it is important for pupils to also understand the school's expectations in relation to attendance - this should be shared regularly (e.g. termly) in an age-appropriate way

Further guidance and an example school attendance policy can be found on the Attendance Specialist page of the Essex School Infolink: Link to example Attendance Policy

Implementing this guidance

Schools need to be clear about how they are implementing the approaches recommended in this guidance. In addition to their attendance policy, it is useful for schools to have a 'provision map' or similar, showing the types of support available for pupils who have been assessed as having attendance difficulties.

Attendance and pastoral teams

The attendance and pastoral teams in school should be the first place where attendance difficulties are recognised, assessed and understood. Members of the attendance team will work with parents/carers and colleagues to implement support plans for pupils who have school attendance difficulties. It is crucial that there are clearly defined roles and responsibilities for the different members of staff in the attendance team, and those other colleagues or professionals from outside agencies who may become involved.

Schools must have one or more named members of staff who are responsible for the day to day monitoring of attendance, including effective communication with parents, pupils and staff when absence occurs. These people are best placed to escalate any concerns about attendance so that effective support can be implemented quickly. This process is key to the early recognition of attendance difficulties.

Encouragement and incentives

Many schools will use encouragement and incentives to support good attendance. It is important that these targets should be both aspirational and achievable for all pupils.

- Incentives, goals and rewards should be offered throughout the academic year in a variety of different ways so that all levels of, and improvements in, attendance can be celebrated, and momentum is maintained

- Competition can be a positive way to encourage and incentivise pupils e.g. to have friendly competition between classes and/or year groups allows focus and reward to be provided in relation to attendance. However, it is important to be careful to avoid attributing blame or shame to the child or young person and their family

- Consider ways to take account of pupils with additional needs or periods of illness which may prove to be demotivating in terms of aiming for future targets (such as the improvement in attendance mentioned above)

- Parents/carers also need to be recognised and praised when their child has demonstrated resilience in relation to school attendance difficulties e.g. school could send an email to a parent/carer acknowledging their part played in ensuring their child has achieved improved attendance

For pupils who are still struggling to maintain appropriate attendance levels, individualised assessment and planning will be needed. The following need to be considered when planning support.

Medical needs

Pupils who have a known medical need that requires treatment and/or periods of time absent from school specifically related to their condition, should also be acknowledged.

Breakfast clubs

Breakfast clubs can be supportive for attendance by providing a welcoming environment. Specifically, this can alleviate difficulties in managing daily transitions, by reducing the impact of factors which may otherwise hinder their arrival at school and therefore their attendance.
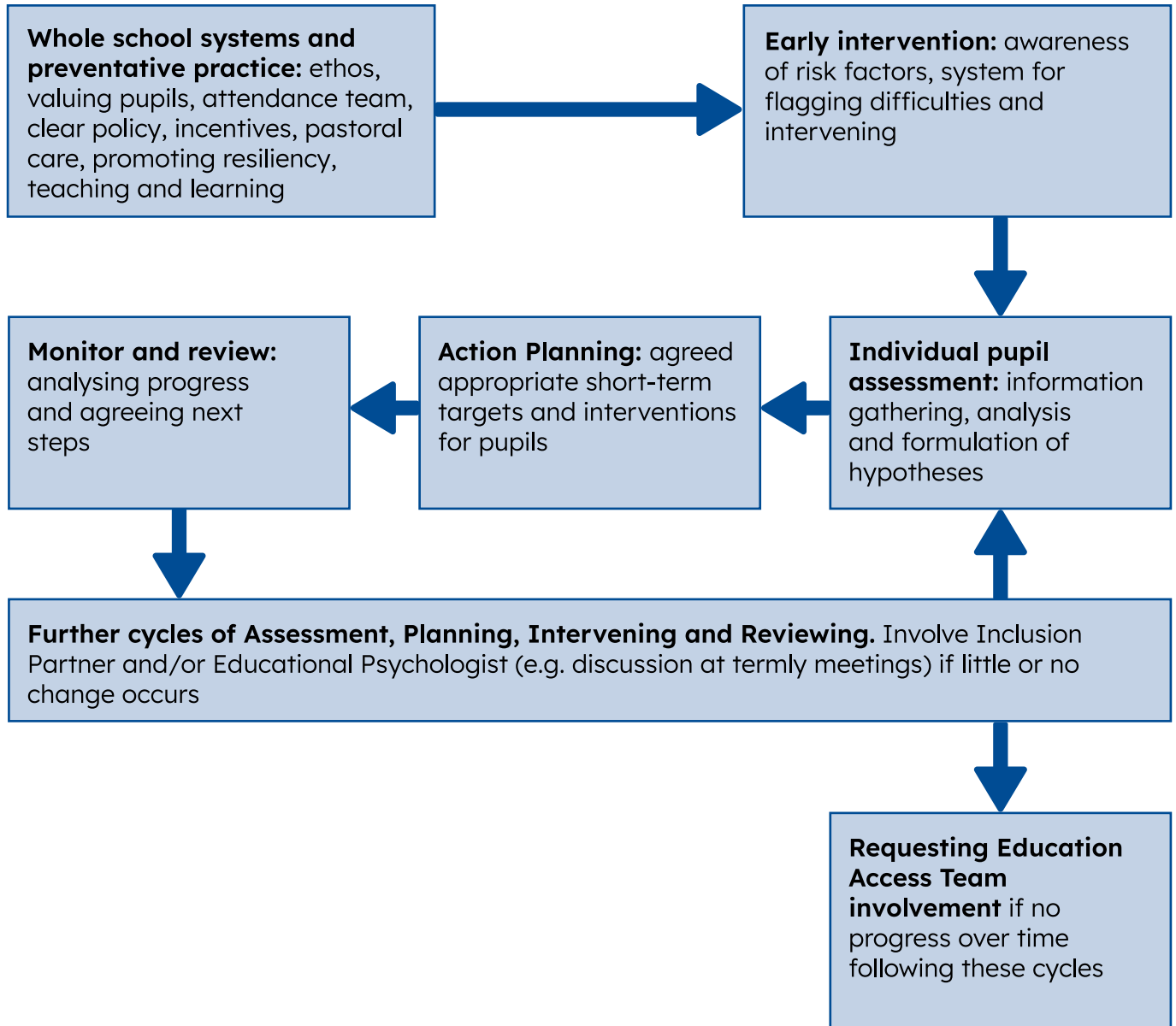
Home-school support networks

Providing an effective support network between the school, child and the parent/carer is crucial, particularly within primary schools, where research has shown absence to often be associated with parent permissiveness. Engaging regularly and working with parents/carers is a key communication process that can help to raise attendance. By familiarising parents/carers with school policies and offering support when needed, they are much more likely to engage in support if a difficulty arises. Even at secondary school, when absence appears to most often be a result of the risk factors within the school environment itself, involving parents/carers is crucial in providing a shared approach between home and school.

Flow chart for whole school approach

School systems for maximising school attendance and for supporting individual pupils with attendance difficulties should look like this:

Whole school systems and preventative practice: ethos, valuing pupils, attendance team, clear policy, incentives, pastoral care, promoting resiliency, teaching and learning

Early intervention: awareness of risk factors, system for flagging difficulties and intervening

Monitor and review: analysing progress and agreeing next steps

Action Planning: agreed appropriate short-term targets and interventions for pupils

Individual pupil assessment: information gathering, analysis and formulation of hypotheses

Further cycles of Assessment, Planning, Intervening and Reviewing. Involve Inclusion Partner and/or Educational Psychologist (e.g. discussion at termly meetings) if little or no change occurs

Requesting Education Access Team involvement if no progress over time following these cycles

Early intervention

By being proactive schools can identify pupil needs and address them early in order to prevent persistent attendance difficulties in many cases. When pupils improve their school attendance, they improve their chances of academic success and life outcomes.

To prevent small problems from becoming large ones, it is helpful to set flags or signals in your school systems to instantly alert the attendance team and school leaders to absences. For example, if a pupil is absent for two days in a row or for more than a certain number of days in a specific period. This signals that additional intervention may be required, such as a parent/carer meeting or home visit.

The Graduated Response: assess-plan-do-review

Alongside Ordinarily Available, 'One Planning' is the Essex approach to the Graduated Response, outlined in the SEND Code of Practice (DfE, 2014). More information about One Planning can be found here: https://send.essex.gov.uk/help-learning/make-plan-action-support-your-child

Schools/settings play a key role in the identification of pupils who are currently experiencing or are at risk of developing school attendance difficulties. It is crucial for schools to:

• have effective whole school systems to support attendance

• be vigilant to early indicators of attendance difficulties

• employ a thorough 'assess-plan-do-review' cycle for pupils who experience difficulties attending (following similar principles to those used in existing SEND systems i.e. one planning)

• consult with any other agencies involved with the CYP, including schools of siblings

Four Categories of School Attendance Difficulties

There are four broad categories relating to school attendance difficulties. It is helpful to consider each of these prior to carrying out the full assessment.

Are there any medical problems? YES > Authorised Absence

Physical illness is the most common cause of pupils staying away from school. In most cases this is genuine, and the absence is straightforward. There are instances where there a pupil has frequent days off school for minor illnesses which may raise concerns about the underlying reason for the absences (further investigation is warranted).

Are parents concerned? NO > Parentally Permissive Absence

Parents may permit their child to stay at home for their own reasons e.g. for company or to act as a young carer. They may not value education. They may have been in dispute with the school. They may have withdrawn their child deliberately.

Where parents elect to home educate, they are legally obliged to inform the school in writing and must show that they are providing 'out of school education'. More advice can be found from the CME/EHE Team here: schools.essex.gov.uk/pupils/Education_Access/Pages/default. aspx

NB this is different from parents who might collude with the non-attendance of an anxious child, or keep a child off school in good faith, without realising the nature of their attendance difficulties.

Do parents know pupil's whereabouts? NO > Self-determined Absence

There are no common indicators of emotional distress at the prospect of attending school and parents/carers are usually unaware of their child's location. Pupils are seeking a pleasant/rewarding experience which keeps them out of school. In some cases, they may be at home taking part in a rewarding activity e.g. sleeping or playing computer games. Pupils typically lack interest in schoolwork and are resistant to academic/behavioural expectations in school; in extreme cases they may display anti-social behaviour. Consideration should be given to CYP missing and/or at risk in the community (RIC).

Does the pupil show significant emotional distress? YES > Emotionally-Based School Avoidance

The presence of severe emotional distress at the time of attending (or even at the prospect of attending) school, usually anxiety. This is in contrast to self-determined absenteeism, as the pupil will usually be at home during school hours, parents will be aware (and concerned) and there is unlikely to be any significant anti-social behaviour.

NB: there is often no emotional distress at weekends or during school holidays and the pupil may even function well at various times when they manage to attend school. Persistent emotional distress may include physical symptoms and dysregulation.

One of the barriers in these cases is the uncertainty about the presence of physical illness; there can be physical symptoms of anxiety and parents/carers/GPs can unwittingly provide medical explanations for Emotionally-Based School Avoidance.

Assessment and analysis

For pupils with school attendance difficulties, a thorough and systematic assessment of the situation is essential in order to plan effective support and intervention. It is important that even in apparently simple cases, a systematic approach is used so that all aspects of the situation are examined before an action plan is designed and implemented.

It is quite common for school absence to be treated as a 'blip' by:

- oversimplifying it ("They're trying it on")

- minimising it ("It's just a passing phase")

- attempting to get immediate results ("Get them back in on Monday morning")

These responses are often driven by a lack of understanding, time constraints and lack of clarity of roles. Furthermore, they do not convey the values of compassion and kindness, hope, connection and belonging. Instead, our mindset should enable us to be curious, asking:

- What has happened/is happening?

- Why/why now?

- What can we do to help?

Why do an assessment?

- To analyse the nature and severity of the school attendance difficulties (and the nature and severity of any contributing emotional/wellbeing factors, if appropriate)

- To consider the factors that may be contributing to the school attendance difficulties

- To establish the main function of the absence and to formulate a hypothesis which can inform intervention (see functional model, page 22)

- To identify any potential safeguarding issues/risks.

Who should do the assessment?

School attendance difficulties come to the attention of various practitioners, but it is usually school staff who will be initially aware of a difficulty (class teacher, form tutor, head of year, SENCo). In the vast majority of cases these frontline professionals who already know and have a positive relationship with the pupil are best place to take the lead on assessment and intervention planning. However, there should also be discussion with the designated safeguarding lead, to ensure any relevant contextual information is considered as part of the assessment. They may seek support from outside agencies e.g. School Nurse, Inclusion Partner, Educational Psychologist or Education Access Specialist. This is especially recommended at the point of assessment.

When should assessment happen?

Early intervention is crucial, especially where pupils have anxiety about attending school; the longer they stay away, the higher their levels of anxiety will be when attempting to return.

In reality, schools are likely to be working towards numerical targets for attendance levels and this can cause a delay in identifying pupils who are anxious about attending, particularly where they are managing to attend sporadically (which may be keeping their attendance data above the cut-off for concern).

Context

A systemic approach to assessing attendance difficulties should be taken, studying and addressing problems in the context in which they occur. Every individual is embedded within several contexts – in the case of school absence the two most important contexts for any pupil are likely to be their family and school systems. These are interacting systems i.e. they influence each other.

Gathering information from parents/carers

It is important to involve parents / carers in the decisions being made and in gathering information about the current situation. Information can be gathered by asking questions to explore areas of the CYP's life such as:

- Their developmental and educational history

- Their strengths, aspirations and interests

- If there have been any changes or significant losses within the CYP's life

- Their relationships and reported friendship groups

- Their academic progress

- Their behaviour (including any presenting symptoms of anxiety)

- What the CYP's typical day might be like, including comparing days when they go to school to those when they do not

- What the CYP's typical morning and evening routines are

- What the impact of the CYP's non-attendance is on various family members

- What the parents'/carers' views are on the reasons for the CYP's school attendance difficulties

- If there are any exceptions (times when school avoidance occurs less frequently)

- If there have been any previous attempts to address the issue. It could also be helpful to find out how the CYP best communicates with their family, either by asking them or observing them.

Circular causality

Look out for 'circular causality' e.g. child perceives school as threatening – school overtly or covertly blame parents/carers for not getting child in school – parents/carers feel attacked and become more protective – child feels the school is even more threatening...

The Functional Model

When considering the factors that motivate and maintain school attendance difficulties, it is extremely helpful to use a functional model of analysis (Kearney and Silverman).

This model proposes four broad reasons why pupils do not attend school:

Function 1: Avoiding things in school that lead to negative emotions (e.g. anxiety)

Function 2: Avoiding difficult social situations, evaluations or judgements in school

Function 3: Gaining attention from significant others at home

Function 4: Gaining rewarding things or activities outside of school and CYP missing and at risk in the community (RIC).

The advantages of this model include the fact that it covers all types of school attendance difficulty that may be encountered. It has also been shown to inform appropriate intervention strategies (within clinical populations in USA).

Within each of the categories above, a pupil's school absence could be anywhere on a continuum of varying degrees of severity, ranging from full but reluctant attendance to no attendance at all:

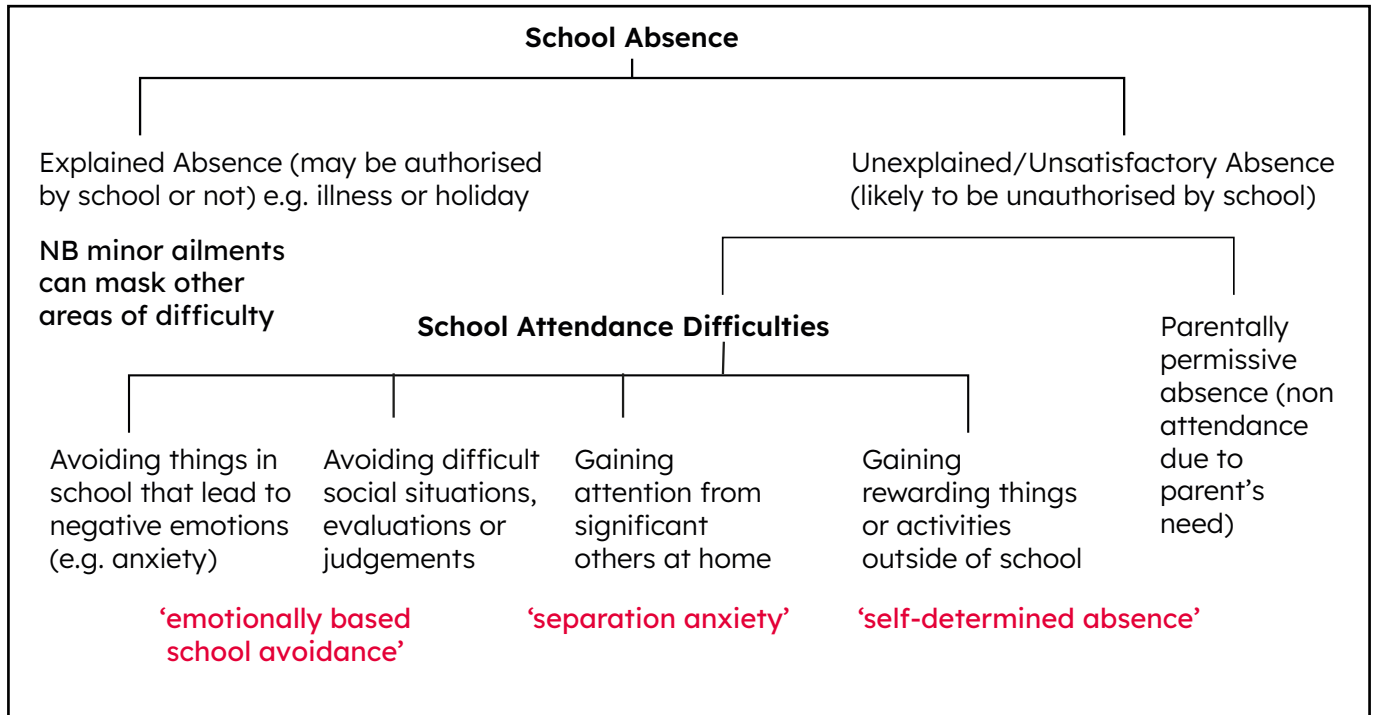| Full attendance (school staff may be unaware of pupil reluctance or emotional difficulties) | Occasional absence e.g. odd days off or lessons missed | Sporadic absences for a few weeks, including post-registration (there may be patterns) | Persistent non-attendance (long periods off school or long-lasting difficulties) |

Diagram for school absence

The diagram below shows one way to conceptualise the different types of school absence and school attendance difficulty, incorporating the four functions described above:

School Absence

Explained Absence (may be authorised by school or not) e.g. illness or holiday

Unexplained/Unsatisfactory Absence (likely to be unauthorised by school)

NB minor ailments can mask other areas of difficulty

School Attendance Difficulties

Parentally permissive absence (non attendance due to parent's need)

Avoiding things in school that lead to negative emotions (e.g. anxiety)

Avoiding difficult social situations, evaluations or judgements

Gaining attention from significant others at home

Gaining rewarding things or activities outside of school

'emotionally based school avoidance'

'separation anxiety'

'self-determined absence'

Assessment tools

The following documents, designed to help school staff, parents/carers and professionals gather useful information about a pupil's school attendance difficulties, can be found at the end of this document.:

- School Attendance Difficulties Assessment Form (with guidance notes)

- School Attendance Difficulties Assessment Form (blank)

- School Attendance Difficulties Rating Scale – pupil version

- School Attendance Difficulties Rating Scale – parent version

- The EBSA Horizons Risk and Resilience Profiles were developed by Dr Jerricah Holder in colloboration with EdPsychEd as part of the EBSA Horizons Course www.edpsyched.co.uk/risk-resilience-profiles

Support and targeted intervention

Action planning

Once a thorough assessment has been carried out and a pupil's absence from school is better understood, it is crucial to make a plan of action. This should be devised with involvement of all the key people, including parents/carers, a member of school staff with whom the pupil has a positive relationship and the pupil (at an age-appropriate level). It should be specific and written down. School link Inclusion Partners and Educational Psychologists can provide advice and support for action planning.

A plan for attendance should include all of the following:

- Direct communication between parents/carers and school (agree expectations regarding frequency and methods of contact, as well as response times)

- If the pupil is not currently attending; a return to school at the earliest opportunity (this may be a phased return)

- Home visits by school staff, if needed

- Realistic and achievable targets

- A personalised programme of support for the pupil (and perhaps interventions for parents/carers if needed)

- A key adult in school and a 'safe place' where the pupil can go during the school day, if needed

- A robust method of ensuring all school staff (and any visiting teachers) are informed and appropriately updated about the pupil's needs, objectives and support strategies

Interventions based on the functional model

Support plans and interventions should be based on the outcomes of robust assessments, and consistent with the functional model. Interventions should be agreed as part of action planning.

Function 1: Avoiding things in school that lead to negative emotions (e.g. anxiety)

Interventions should include teaching pupils, in an age-appropriate way, about the nature of anxiety (psycho-education), how it affects people generally and how it affects them specifically. This could include:

- Recognising and describing the signals of anxiety e.g. drawings on a body diagram, feelings vocabulary, discussing anxiety in story books, keeping a 'feelings diary'

- Learning about the impact of adrenalin and the stress response

- Identifying the thoughts that accompany anxious/worried feelings and consider which might be helpful or unhelpful thoughts in terms of leading to anxiety (cognitive behavioural approaches)

Pupils need to know that avoiding their feared situation ultimately makes their anxiety feel worse the next time they approach that situation. They may need to be supported through a small-step programme of gradual re-exposure to school or the aspects of school which cause them anxiety (desensitisation).

Pupils need to be taught techniques for managing their anxiety, such as:

- deep breathing (practise at calm times, little and often)

- progressive muscle relaxation

- distraction e.g. singing, counting backwards, looking at the details of an object/picture

- positive self-talk (to encourage more helpful/realistic thinking)

Parents/carers (and teachers) also need to be given information so that they can support the pupil at home/in the classroom.

Pupils should be allocated a key adult, with whom they have a positive relationship, and have access to a 'safe place' in school.

In addition to strategies that provide immediate relief, it is important for children and young people to learn how to disperse anxiety that builds up through the day or week. They should be supported to find ways of unwinding that they can easily and regularly incorporate in to their everyday life and timetable, for example:

- Physical exercise

- Relaxing activities

Also consider general wellbeing in relation to eating, sleeping etc.

Seek further advice from your school's link Educational Psychologist or Inclusion Partner, where necessary.

Function 2: Avoiding difficult social situations, evaluations or judgements in school

As above, interventions should include teaching about anxiety and how to manage it. Pupils may also need to be taught specific social skills and given opportunities to practice coping skills in real-life situations, starting small and building up to those which are most challenging for them.

If their anxiety and social difficulties are linked to neurological diversity (such as Autism Spectrum Disorder), they may need more specialised interventions. Seek further advice from your school's link Educational Psychologist or Inclusion Partner, where necessary.

Function 3: Gaining attention from significant others at home

Intervention may include work with parents/carers, supporting them to develop skills and techniques to:

- respond to the behaviours which communicate stress/distress or physical/somatic complaints

- establish morning routines

- use problem-solving techniques

- establish positive and individual time to spend with the child outside school hours

- limit the attention the child receives when they do not attend school during school hours

- establish reward systems for when the pupil attends school

It may be appropriate to seek further support/advice from the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) in these cases, as well as from your school's link Educational Psychologist or Inclusion Partner.

Function 4: Gaining rewarding things or activities outside of school

Careful consideration should be given to any underlying needs which may have initially caused or contributed to attendance difficulties, such as those identified through assessment of Risk & Protective Factors and remember to consider CYP Missing and at Risk in the Community (RIC).

Interventions in this area could include:

- Reflection on parental attention and peer contact, if this inadvertently reinforces non-attendance during school hours

- If possible, remove access to the more stimulating activity (e.g. computer games) during school hours

- Support the pupil in travelling to and from school

- Teach the pupil how to say no to inappropriate or dangerous requests from others (e.g. practise using scripts)

- Make school as motivating and connecting as possible; find out the pupil's areas of strength and apply these to learning tasks and extra-curricular opportunities as much as possible

- Activities to explore and shift the pupil's self-perceptions and/or self-esteem and to teach and build resilience

- Motivational Interviewing: this approach can be particularly useful with older pupils who are feeling demotivated/disaffected by school (staff training may be required, speak to school link EP)

Some of these CYP may be in the Youth Justice System and will have an allocated Youth Offending Service worker. There is also support from Social Care for those missing or at risk in the community.

www.escb.co.uk/working-with-children/risk-in-the-community-ric/ric-pathway

Develop their motivation to be in school.

Motivation theory suggests you can develop an individual's intrinsic motivation by increasing their feelings of control, competency, relatedness and purpose.

- Encourage the CYP to focus their attention on positive aspects of school (e.g. their friends, their favourite lesson/teacher, activities they enjoy doing) instead of the negatives (i.e. why they are finding it difficult to attend). When they start to attend school, get them to complete a simple gratitude journal or encourage them to identify one thing that has gone well at school each day, recording this visually in a book or chart to be referred to later

- Find out what reasons for going to school motivate the CYP, and encourage them to consider how attending school will help them achieve their own personal goals and ambitions (what would they like life to look like in the future?), for example, having friends, getting qualifications, pursuing interests, moving towards a career they want. It may be helpful to remind the CYP that it is important to attend school, although this should be carefully considered as it could add pressure.

Talking about taking things gradually and being there to support them will aid in reducing that feeling.

- If the CYP is not in school, share school experiences with the CYP that they may enjoy. For example, staff could record a particularly exciting science lesson and share this with the CYP. Share newsletters with the CYP that describe exciting trips and activities undertaken by the peers.

- Provide opportunities for the CYP to develop and maintain relationships with others – teachers, other staff and peers. While this may seem as if it is rewarding the CYP for not attending school (or having limited attendance), strengthening the link to the school and promoting a feeling of belonging will be important motivators for them to go back to school and show they are still welcome. Peers could also act as a support network for the CYP.

  - If the CYP is not currently in school, key staff could maintain links with the CYP via email, recorded video messages or letters (in line with school policy)

  - Provide opportunities for the key adult to get to know the CYP well. This could be doing a shared activity together (e.g. cleaning up the classroom before lunch time, watering plants in the playground, organising an activity)

  - The CYP should be encouraged to maintain or develop relationships with their peers. This is likely to be the best motivation if the CYP feels that they are missing out on spending time with their friends (e.g. at breaktimes and lunch times) and if they do not feel that they can fully participate in all conversations (e.g. if they are talking about the teachers/ other peers/their lessons).
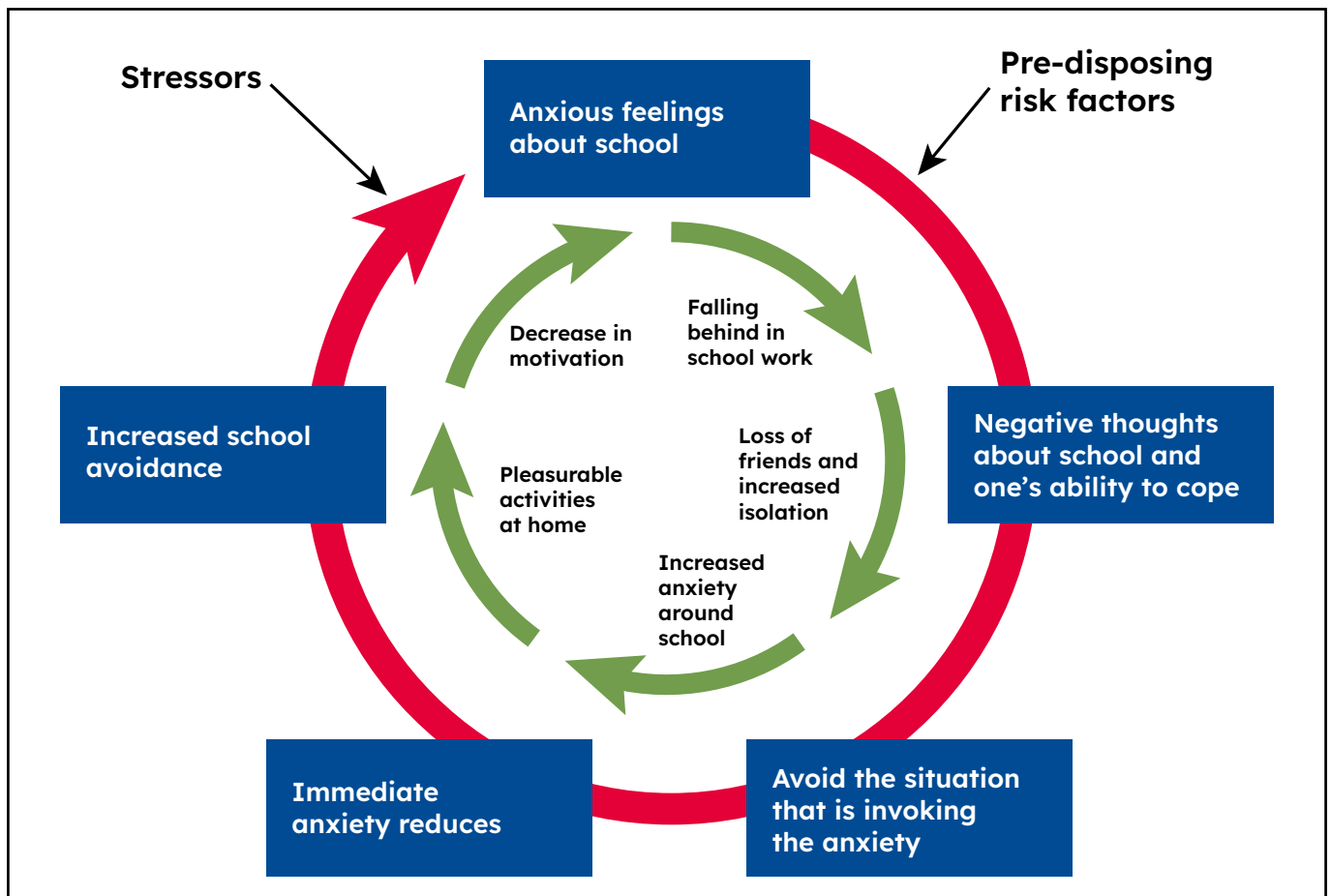
More than one function

It is possible for a pupil's school absence to have more than one function. There are many cases where pupils who are absent from school initially for reasons relating to anxiety (e.g. function 1 or 2) then go on to develop secondary difficulties which fit with Function 4 (because they develop strategies for self-regulation which are at odds with school attendance, such as sleeping late in the mornings or wearing comfortable clothing).

It is crucial to understand each function of school absence and to target interventions at each area of need.

Secondary functions

Any pupil who is absent from school for significant periods of time is likely to face additional challenges and barriers such as the deterioration in wellbeing, loss of routine, lack of contact with friends and falling behind with schoolwork. This is demonstrated in the diagram below.

Any support plan needs to take account of these.

West Sussex EPS EBSA Guidance 3 (2015)

Additional risk factors

Some pupils with school attendance difficulties will also have other areas of special educational need which require additional interventions or adapted support strategies. For example:

- **Learning difficulties/delay** – pupils may need extra support in lessons on an ongoing basis, more targeted help to catch up on missed work due to absence, adaptations to support strategies for their attendance difficulties

- **Autism and social communication differences** – autistic pupils are more vulnerable to anxiety than typically developing children, with up to 40% of CYPs with autism meeting criteria for a co-morbid anxiety disorder (van Steensel et al., 2011). Autistic children and young people are more likely to be experiencing higher levels of general anxiety daily as they must navigate a complicated and often confusing sensory and social world. In the school setting, even seemingly small changes can trigger anxiety, for example, moving desk or a change in teacher. Other aspects which can influence the emotional wellbeing of autistic CYP may relate to the three areas of difference i.e., differences in social understanding and communication, sensory processing and integration, information processing and understanding. Challenges may relate to:

  · sensory processing and modulation e.g., under or over-responsive to environmental stimuli such as noises, lights and smells

  · differences with social understanding, communication and interactions

  · differences in understanding and responding to their own and others' emotions

  · worrying about uncertainty, change or moving between places/activities

  · masking or trying to 'fit in' by changing their behaviour and internalising any stress/ anxiety they feel in certain situations

  · demand and performance anxiety for example, with schoolwork or exams.

Whilst the strategies for supporting autistic pupils are similar to those used when supporting non-autistic CYP, it is essential that input is personalised with adaptations to materials. Supporting adults will need to be mindful that autistic individuals may well be more inclined to masking and experiencing challenge with identifying and understanding emotions (due to Alexithymia and interoception differences). This provides an additional vulnerability in that their differences may not be evident to others at school or may be minimised. The impact of masking and camouflaging can lead to children experiencing 'burnout' and becoming very dysregulated once they are at home.

As such, building a relationship with the CYP and allowing time for this is key. Alongside this, those at home and in school will need to communicate to ensure all parties have a holistic and shared view of need.

Support for autistic CYP will include ensuring peer and staff understanding of autistic differences (e.g., through training), providing increased certainty and predictability (e.g., through visual timetables) alongside ongoing support that is person centred and regularly reviewed (e.g., increased visual supports, input with social and emotional understanding and regulation, increased opportunities for sensory breaks, support to utilise strengths and opportunities to engage with areas of interest). The experience of having a peer group and experiencing belonging is very important for all pupils, including those with autism. As such, time, space and opportunities must be provided for autistic and neurodiverse pupils to spend time together ('finding their tribe').

More information for supporting autistic children is included in the Ordinarily Available guidance and through the [Autism Education Trust](#), as well as through link EPs and IPs.

Keeping in touch

Regardless of the reason(s) why, keep in contact with students who are not attending school at all. It is important to try to keep the CYP feeling connected to the school even if they are not currently attending. This can be done through: TEAMs, Zoom, or Google meet calls; sending emails, postcards and letters; phone calls; sending photographs of classwork; sending work home; staff visiting the CYP at home etc.

Maintaining connection to school

Letter writing from peers and staff to CYP

Home visits

Sharing of tasks and homework

Regular key adult contact with CYP

Allow CYP to visit school in a safer way, such as clubs, with their favourite teacher, with parents.

Virtual tasks and contact

Suggest interventions for parents

Resources from gathering views of CYP to be used at home by parent or key worker

Gradual steps

Moving from Early Years settings to school

For some children starting in Reception, this may be the first time that they have been away from their parents for extended periods of time and they may struggle to follow the routine of the school day. These children may find the transition into school difficult and you may see behaviours related to separation anxiety (e.g. crying, clinging to parents).

Some things that could be helpful to do with children in Reception (or encourage their parents to do with them) include:

• Reading story books about going to school

• Parents and CYP practicing their walk to school and trying on their school uniform

• Pictures and video tour of the school building (e.g. entrance, toilets, cloakroom, playground, classroom, corridors) and key members of staff

• Use of transitional objects to ease the CYP's anxiety. If staff know about a child who is anxious, then it may be helpful to ensure, where possible, that they have a familiar peer in their group.

Moving from primary to secondary school

With this move, the following changes can have an impact:

• Increase in school size

• Increase in the number of students

• Increase in workload and academic expectations

• Changes in timetabling (including having lessons with different peers each time)

• Having to adapt to different teaching styles and the ways subjects are taught

  · Increased expectations of independence

  · Transitioning from being the oldest in the school to the youngest

  · Changes in pastoral support arrangements.

What can schools do to help the process?

It is important to remember that some students will find this change harder than others. Primary schools are very good at sending information about specific pupils with a cause for concern to the relevant secondary schools. To support this further, a list of students identified as being at risk of EBSA could be sent alongside information about the risk factors and plans in place.

Primary school recommendations:

• Devote time in the summer term to talking about secondary school in positive terms; debunking myths and solving problems with humour

• Work through a transition preparation programme in collaboration with the secondary schools

- Help children with:
  - finding their way around using a floor plan
  - following timetables
  - thinking about organisation of bag packing, equipment and so on
- Provide extra visits to the secondary schools combining SEND students with those from other schools.

Secondary school recommendations:

- Nominate staff members to welcome students; meet and greet, hold check-ins etc.
- Facilitate visits by year 7, 8 and 9 students to primary feeder schools to have informal discussions with Y6 pupils
- Hold an open evening allowing students to walk around the school and meet some staff
- Take photos and videos of areas of the school and key staff, for familiarisation over the summer holiday
- Provide a map and an exemplar timetable for familiarisation over the summer holiday
- Highlight the positive aspects of the secondary school
- Provide personalised visits if necessary.

Parents and carers recommendations:

- Talk in positive terms about the move
- Discuss it in terms of a 'fresh start' for children that have not experienced a positive time in school
- Help your child develop independence skills by encouraging them to organise themselves with small aspects of their day during the summer break
- Look at and talk about the floor plans / time-tables / key staff
- Walk past or drive to the new school to familiarise your child with the building and entrance and local area
- Practise catching the bus if this is what your child will be expected to do
- Help your child budget for lunch and drinks if they have any shopping or days out with friends during the summer
- Ensure that your child has the correct uniform and the various equipment stated on any paperwork sent by secondary schools.

The University College London STARS research programme provides a range of resources to support children moving from primary to secondary school:
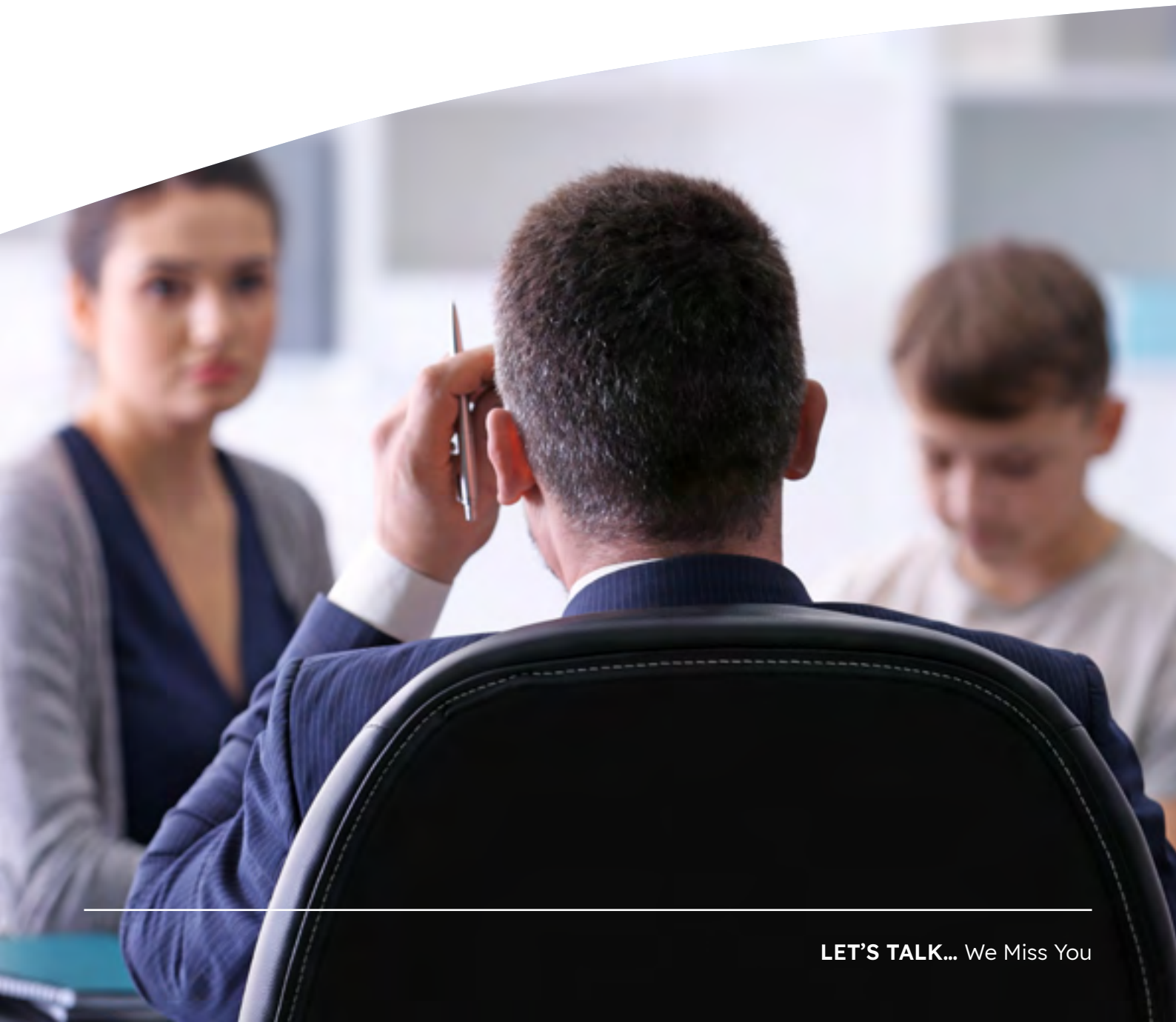
Information, Downloads and Resources | UCL Psychology and Language Sciences - UCL – University College London

Roles and responsibilities

Any of the following might become involved in supporting a pupil who has school attendance difficulties. It is important that there is a shared understanding in school (which is also clearly communicated with parents) about who has what role.

Role	Possible involvement/responsibilities
Form Tutor/Teacher (Secondary)	Regular contact – identification, providing assessment information, prevention, monitoring and intervention
Class Teacher (Primary)	Daily contact – identification, providing assessment information, prevention, monitoring and intervention
SENCo	Overview of case, may be involved in gathering assessment information and planning/monitoring interventions, might be the link to outside agency support
Disadvantage Champion	Leaders that have been selected, by schools, to lead on the coordination/training/updates of the LA's Disadvantaged Strategy
Attendance Lead	School attendance procedures, risk assessment, response to early concern, monitoring attendance data, meeting with parents
Designated Mental Health Lead	Has strategic oversight of emotional wellbeing and mental health across the school
Designated Safeguarding Lead	Has oversight of safeguarding in the school and may hold relevant information on the child/family
Disadvantaged Champion	Leaders that have been selected, by schools, to lead on the coordination/training/updates of the LA's Disadvantaged Strategy
Pastoral Lead (e.g. Head of Year or Deputy Head Teacher)	Systemic pastoral issues, response to early concern, monitoring attendance data, meeting with pupil/parents
Learning Support Assistant	Regular contact within lessons and/or delivering more targeted interventions
School Nurse	May give advice on medical issues, sign-post to other relevant services
Attendance Specialist Team	Will provide information, advice and guidance regarding all things related to attendance

Role	Possible involvement/responsibilities
Educational Psychologist and Inclusion Partner	Can support school systemically and with individual cases where staff feel more specialist knowledge is required to assess need and/or devise a support plan
Engagement Facilitator	Can support schools and families to work more closely together and to engage families and pupils with education
Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)	May become involved in supporting higher level mental health needs
Education Access	May be involved if a pupil is deemed unable to attend school, might work with pupil at home and/or within the school building as part of an agreed reintegration plan

Key adult

The role of a key adult in school is crucial when working with a pupil who has any emotional wellbeing and/or mental health needs, including those relating to attendance difficulties. It can also be extremely helpful for pupils who have low levels of motivation and may have disengaged from certain aspects of school. Below are some attributes and skills that are important for a key adult to have.

Attributes:

- Be open and honest; provide connection and a sense of belonging

- Be empathic and show warmth; show kindness

- Be non-judgmental and curious about the child/young person; show compassion

- Be self-aware and have the capacity to self–develop

- Have integrity and be willing to think ethically, professionally and personally

- Be flexible

- Able to avoid assumptions or prejudice

- Be an advocate for the child; demonstrate hope

- Be able to create their own 'filter' and understand demonstrated behaviour is communication and isn't personal to them.

Emotional literacy skills:

- Be able to self-reflect

- Willing to be open to being challenged

- Identify their own personal levels of competence and if they feel they aren't competent at something to seek and ask for advice

- To have the ability to recognise when they need to look after their own emotional wellbeing and reflect on this

- To understand confidentiality and be mindful of this

- To have the ability to accept the child unconditionally

- Have the confidence to safely and fairly challenge.

Therapeutic skills:

- Listening and attending, being present and congruent for the child

- Having the ability to paraphrase – reflect back what the child says

- Summarise a conversation and put it into context for the child

- Ask open questions

- Accept the child/young person's words with acknowledgement and avoid communicating any judgment of their words

- Encourage the child/young person to reflect on their feelings and remark on any steps they have taken towards their goals in a calm relaxed way

- Help the child/young person to focus on the key issue, rather than bombard them with too much information or instruction

- Challenge appropriately when needed

- Manage silence effectively to allow the child/young person time to think/be thought about

- Recognise the child/young person's strengths, highlight these and encourage them to use the skills needed to succeed

- Recognise transference: when feelings, desires, anxieties and expectations are redirected from the child/young person and applied to the supporting adult. i.e. The child/young person tells the adult, 'now look what you've made me do' … the child redirects their feelings of anxiety, frustration and fear onto the supporting adult

Case studies

Meera

Meera, Year 10, almost overnight stopped attending school. Parents where very worried as her behaviour had also changed, they isolated themselves and became confrontational when asked anything related to school and how they were feeling. A School Attendance Meeting was arranged. Prior to the meeting the school used the 'We Miss You' guidance. From the findings, it showed that her parent did not fully understand how she was feeling and how to support her.

The school spoke to both parents about how the results from the assessments could help them to better understand Meera's behaviours and ensure that the correct support was offered. A meeting was arranged to discuss the key messages arising from the assessments. By the time the meeting date arrived Meera and her parents had agreed for support and Meera agreed to a suitable, achievable reintegration plan, with regular reviews and safe places to speak freely. Meera has now returned to full time education.

Simon

Simon was in year 8 at a mainstream secondary school and had not attended for several months. He has a diagnosis of autism and was presenting as highly anxious. Efforts made by school staff and his family to encourage him to attend school had been unsuccessful. A referral to SET CAMHS had been accepted, but work was at an early stage and not yet having an impact upon attendance. Simon received education with an Education Access Team-commissioned tutor who carried out lessons with him at home and in the community.

An Educational Psychologist (EP) coordinated an assessment of Simon; visiting at home and building rapport. Using the School Attendance Difficulties Assessment Form and Rating Scale, the strongest functions (1 and 2) were identified. Provision was recommended to meet these by the EP. A meeting between school staff, SET CAMHS therapist, EP, Simon and his parent led to an agreement of what the difficulties were, what he and his family wanted (i.e. to return to school and obtain some GCSEs). With this agreed as a focus, all those involved identified how they could support and contribute to this. Small steps and regular (half-termly) review meetings were agreed, working on what Simon and others felt that he could manage. These included:

- Moving tuition on to school site

- Establishing a trusting, warm relationship with a keyworker (a senior member of pastoral staff) in school

- Identifying the causes of anxiety in school and supporting Simon to put them in order of challenge, and how he would be supported to overcome each (including lessons)

- Identifying 'safe spaces' where Simon could go in school, when he needed to

- Gradually supporting Simon to attend lessons of his choosing (e.g. ones that he felt less anxious about), recognising this progress and consolidating this before moving on to the next

- Identifying Simon's interests (including building Lego) and developing lunch time groups where he could share this interest with a small group of other children

- Undertaking all of the above with a consistent, explicit and predictable fashion, holding Simon at the centre of planning and recognition

This work continued over the course of a year, and included several changes of key worker (these were managed by giving Simon warning and clarity for who the next key worker would be and making explicit arrangements). The EP subsequently heard from Simon's mother to say that he had left school with several GCSEs and had just completed the first year of college.

Anita

Anita is a primary-aged child who is autistic. She joined her school in Year 4 following a breakdown of placement at her previous school. She was halfway through her first year at her new school when the first COVID-19 lockdown occurred, and she did not attend school during this period.

The school link IP and EP held a consultation with the class teacher who expressed concerns around Anita's attendance and evident emotional dysregulation in school when she did attend. Further exploration with her SENCO and class teacher highlighted that Anita's attendance was rapidly declining and the support offered to her to date had not impacted this. Her SENCO used the assessments in the toolkit and identified the main function of not attending for Anita.

This assessment indicated that Anita was displaying signs of emotionally-based school avoidance (Anita found aspects of school anxiety-provoking). Discussions between the IP and SENCO highlighted the need for an Engagement Facilitator (EF) to work with the school and family to address this. The EF started working with the school and the family and developing a plan of action, based on the information obtained through this assessment. Initial meetings with Anita's family and the school developed a shared plan. The EF and IP completed a joint home visit to further discuss parental concerns and the support needed at home to enable Anita to attend school (e.g. using Zones of Regulation, visual supports and task planners to support the transition to school in the morning).

The agreed plan included the EF meeting with the school staff in addition to meeting with Anita for a short period of time to dicuss her interests, learn about what was going well, with a focus on establishing a positive relationship between them. Meetings with Anita initially took place outside the school environment but continued over a month, with gradual exposure to the school; progressing further to nearer the hub where it was planned that Anita would attend.

Joint planning with the IP, EF, Anita, her family and school staff took place to increase her time in the hub and make it a more positive learning experience for her. The EF and IP suggested Lego Therapy (this was one of her new discovered interests), small steps of Zones of Regulation being implemented in the home, Social Stories, and the exploration of alternative placements, alongside her current school placement, which reflect her interests. Following this meeting, Anita's attendance continued to increase and she is now attending daily and building on her interests in school.

Involving the Education Access Team (EAT)

There is an expectation for schools and settings to have implemented systematic support for CYP before seeking involvement from the EAT. Further guidance can be found on the Education Access pages on the Essex Schools Infolink pages, including the most recent medical policy.

The following questions can be used to help with decision-making when considering the submission of a request for EAT involvement

1. **Has the guidance in this toolkit been implemented and, after cycles of assessment, support/intervention and review, attendance has worsened or not improved?**

    If not, implement this guidance in the first instance.

2. **Have you discussed this CYP with (and involved, if appropriate) your quadrant attendance specialist, link Educational Psychologist and/or Inclusion Partner?**

    If not, discuss this CYP as above with the inclusion of the attendance specialist (e.g. at termly meetings with the SENCO)

3. **Is there evidence that it is unsafe for the child to attend school, and is there evidence that the child's mental or physical health needs are contributing to this?**

    If so, discuss with the school safeguarding team, the quadrant attendance specialist and contact your Education Access Specialist as appropriate.

4. **Does it appear increasingly unrealistic that the child will return to school (despite the assessment, intervention/support and review), and have all other avenues been explored?**

    If so, contact your Education Access Specialist.

5. **If you are unsure, please contact your quadrant Education Access Specialist for advice and to discuss the situation.**

Myths and realities

School attendance is an area where myths can proliferate and can impact how children with attendance difficulties are understood and supported, leading to unintended negative consequences for them.

Myth	Reality
Children and young people who recover relatively quickly from the initial distress of the morning just need a firm approach to settle them into class.	For some CYP, that may be true; it is not unusual for anxiety to quickly dissipate once the perceived threat is removed. However, anxiety may return either later that evening or in the morning so the child or young person will have to relive the feelings all over again.
If an anxious child or young person has come to school for lunch as agreed and seems settled, it is best to push them to stay and even encourage them to attend class.	They may agree to stay but then may be more likely to stay at home the next day as they will now not believe you are to be trusted to keep to any agreement. Do not be tempted to rush the child or young person into taking part in activities that are not part of the agreed plan.
You always need a specialist mental health professional to help.	You don't always require this. Often the changes the school and parents/carers make will help reduce anxiety, and are also likely to be important and impactful during, and after, any specialist involvement. Trusted adults in schools are key to supporting pupil wellbeing and ensuring they feel valued and part of the school community.
The child or young person has Autism so will automatically have school attendance difficulties.	Research indicates that children and young people with an autism diagnosis are more likely to suffer with anxiety than their neurotypical peers, but that does not mean that all CYP with autism cannot attend school regularly. It is important to liaise with the school link EP/IP at a very early stage, as part of implementing this guidance, if you are concerned that an autistic CYP is experiencing school attendance difficulties.

Myth	Reality
Because the child or young person is absent, school staff must continue with first/same day calling every day.	Some schools use systems and processes to contact parents on each day of absence and might believe that contact must be made on each day of absence for all pupils. However, this is not a legal requirement. For instance, some schools do not initiate contact but instead have a policy that parents are to make contact on each day of absence.
	Whilst attendance-related guidance may not require daily contact, safeguarding guidance may do so in cases where the vulnerability of the pupil concerned warrants such action. However, where there are no safeguarding concerns, schools can agree (on a case-by-case basis) the frequency with which they and parents are to communicate where long-term absence appears unavoidable and/or the CYP is being supported by others. In these instances, parents may feel supported and 'held in mind' rather than under undue pressure to share daily updates where school staff are already aware of the situation following previous work with the family.
	Taking into consideration the guidance that was in place during school closures in lockdown periods, once a week may seem to be an appropriate level of contact that schools should aim for, from a safeguarding perspective, unless there are particular safeguarding concerns. Opportunities to see the CYP should be facilitated and achieved as far as possible by school staff, where long-term absence appears unavoidable, via a supportive weekly video call between the CYP and a keyworker/staff member. This could incorporate and facilitate the strategies outlined in this guidance.
	The Designated Safeguarding Lead should be consulted where there are potential safeguarding concerns, as they will advise on if/when to link with other partners.

Myth	Reality
If a child or young person is not attending school, we must involve the Education Access Team (EAT) so that they can have tuition at home.	It is expected that schools, working with other partners, carry out assessment, planning, support and review before involving the EAT. If EAT become involved, any education that is offered would be carefully planned in conjunction with parents/carers and others involved.

Resources and contacts for supporting emotional wellbeing and mental health

- [Child and Adolscence Mental Health Service SET CAMHS](#) or call the SPA on 0800 953 0222

- [Children and Family Operations Hub](#) or call 0345 603 7627

- [ECC SEMH Strategy Infolink Portal](#)

- [Essex SEND Services](#)

- [Mentally Healthy Schools](#)

- [Trauma Perceptive Practice (TPP)](#)

The Children's Society

www.childrensociety.org.uk

- Information and research data

- Guidance for parents: 'How to support your child's wellbeing' leaflet (free to download)

- Resources for Children and Young People – advice on wide range topics, organised by age group

---

Headspace

www.headspace.com

- Mindfulness and guided mediation app

- Games and activities to promote wellbeing

- Basic app is free but add-ons cost

Kooth online counselling

https://xenzone.com/kooth for information about Kooth

https://kooth.com website for young people

Kooth is a free, confidential, safe and anonymous way for young people aged 11-26th birthday to ask for help from a team of highly qualified and experienced counsellors and support workers. This is a service that has been commissioned by Southend, Essex & Thurrock CCGs. Kooth.com is accredited by The British Association of Psychotherapy and Counselling (BACP).

- Access to trained counsellors up to 10 pm each day (mobile, tablet & desktop)
- Drop in chats with counsellors or booked 1:1 chats with a counsellor
- Themed message forums and secure web-based email

Not Fine in School

https://notfineinschool.co.uk

Not Fine in School was created as a resource for the growing numbers of families with children experiencing school attendance barriers.

The Resilience Framework

What is the Resilience Framework? - www.boingboing.org.uk

Togetherall

https://togetherall.com/en-gb

Togetherall is a safe, online community where people support each other anonymously to improve mental health and wellbeing.

Millions of people in the UK have access via their participating employer, university, college, NHS provider or local council. All armed forces personnel, veterans and their families (16+) also have free access.

Young Minds

(UK's leading charity in Young People's mental health)

www.youngminds.org.uk

- Parent guidance and support
- Free online support for YP and parents
- Information, resources and training available
- Support School Improvement Plans

YouTube

There are many useful resources on www.youtube.co.uk for example videos for 'guided imagery' and relaxation exercises as well as child-friendly explanations about anxiety and the 'fight or flight' response.

Adults should always check the appropriateness of content from YouTube before sharing it with CYP, as well as supervising for safety online.

Further reading and useful materials

Think Good Feel Good: A Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Workbook for Children and Young People (Paul Stallard) – an extremely useful and accessible book with theory, information, activities and printable resources to be used with children and young people

Thinking Good, Feeling Better: A Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Workbook for Adolescents (Paul Stallard)

The Homunculi Approach to Social and Emotional Wellbeing: A Flexible CBT Programme for Young people on the Autism Spectrum or with Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (Anne Greig & Tommy Mackay)

Starving the Anxiety Gremlin: A Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Workbooks on Anxiety Management for Yong People (Kate Collins-Donnelly)

Starving the Anxiety Gremlin for Children aged 5-9: A Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Workbook People (Kate Collins-Donnelly)

The Zones of Regulation. Think Social Publishing – curriculum ideas and materials for teaching emotional awareness and self-regulation, based on cognitive behavioural approaches

Dealing with Feeling (Tina Rae). Published by Lucky Duck

Anxiety: CBT with Children and Young People – contains lots of useful and practical ideas for helping pupils to manage anxiety

Attachment in the Classroom (by Heather Geddes) – accessible and practical information about supporting pupils with attachment needs in schools

A Volcano in My Tummy (Elaine Whitehouse and Warwick Pudney) – activities to use with pupils who struggle with managing angry feelings

Keeping Pupils and Staff Safe: management of behaviour in schools, including use of physical contact and restrictive / non-restrictive physical intervention to address difficult and harmful behaviour   Guidance for Schools (Autumn 2018)

Let's Talk About Self-Harm Southend, Essex and Thurrock Toolkit. Available at: https://schools.essex.gov.uk/pupils/social_emotional_mental_health_portal_for_schools/Pages/lets_talk_semh_resource_suite.aspx

The Selective Mutism Resource Manual (Maggie Johnson and Alison Wintgens)

Understanding School Refusal: A Handbook for Professionals in Education, Health and Social Care. Thambirajah, M.S, Grandison, J. & De-Hayes, L. (2008)

Online resources

Addressing emotionally-based school avoidance (annafreud.org)

This resource looks at the topic of emotionally-based school avoidance (EBSA) and shares ideas to help education staff address the issue.

EBSA Toolkit – practical tools for schools to assess where the challenges lie, including auditing their own response and support for EBSA, identifying risk factors, effective interventions: https://bromleyeducationmatters.uk/Page/18350

Page 46 – card sort to use with students to understand which of the 4 functions is at play: https://wakefield.mylocaloffer.org/common-concerns/school-refusal-and-avoidance

Page 39 – functions of behaviour, environment, responding to difficulties cards with: https://www.solihull.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2021-12/Emotionally-Based-School-Non-Attendance-Guidance-for-Schools.pdf

The School Wellbeing Card set was developed by experienced Educational Psychologist, trainer and author, Dr Jerricah Holder. They have been designed to provide a platform for discussion, in which invaluable insight into how the young person views and makes sense of their experience of school can be sought and places the child's voice at the centre of any planning.

School Wellbeing Risk and Resilience Card Set schoolwellbeingcards.co.uk

Acknowledgements

This guidance is created with the support of the Emotional Wellbeing & Mental Health Strategic Board.

Special thanks to the contributions of the working group, consisting of representatives from:

- Essex County Council
    - Attendance Specialist Team
    - Education Access Team
    - SEND Inclusion and Psychology Team
    - SEND Operations
    - SEMH Strategy Team
    - Statutory Eduation Compliance Team
    - Virtual School
- SET CAMHS
- MIND North-East Essex

Additional thanks to Dr Richard Skelton, Kate Barnett and Dr Jerricah Holder.

Assessment tools

1. School Attendance Difficulties Assessment Form – with guidance notes

2. School Attendance Difficulties Assessment Form

3. School Attendance Difficulties Rating Scale – pupil version

4. School Attendance Difficulties Rating Scale – parent version

5. The EBSA Horizons Risk and Resilience Profiles were developed by Dr Jerricah Holder in colloboration with EdPsychEd as part of the EBSA Horizons Course
    EBSA | The EBSA Risk and Resilience Profiles (incl. scoring) | CYP (edpsyched.co.uk)

6. Checklist for supporting schools in dealing with school attendance difficulties.
    schools.essex.gov.uk/pupils/attendance_specialist_teams/Pages/Useful-Documents.aspx

1. School Attendance Difficulties Assessment Form - Guidance Notes

The aims of this assessment are to:

1. analyse the nature and severity of the school attendance difficulties (what is happening?)

2. consider what factors are contributing to and maintaining the attendance difficulties (why is it happening?)

3. formulate a hypothesis which can be used to inform intervention (how can we help?)

Pupil

Date of birth

Year group

School

Date completed

Completed by

Description of school absence

• How often has the pupil attended school in the last few days/weeks/months?

• What behaviours have been observed?

• Analysis of register data – trends, patterns and reasons given for School Absence

• Is there a history of attendance difficulties (including at previous schools)?

Developmental history

- Did the pupil reach typical milestones throughout childhood?
- Medical history – has there been any periods of non-attendance due to medical needs?

Information from pupil

- Describe how it feels when you have to go to school
- What is it like for you in the mornings – what does family do when you...?
- Are you having any difficulties at school (work, teachers, peers)?
- Talk me through of a typical day – what are your nervous/unhappy/angry thoughts?
- Give me your 'temperature' at each of these times/places (use 'feelings thermometer' or 0-10 scale)
- When was the first time you felt like this? Tell me a little more about that...
- 'Home to school' drawing with a commentary of their thoughts and feelings along the way. At this point explore exceptions: "Are there days of the week or times of the year when things are better you?" What makes the better?"
- What are you doing when you are not in school?

Information from family

- Family composition – how are members involved and do they have any difficulties at present?
- Description of pupil's behaviour (especially in the mornings before school) or a 'typical' day
- Who is best at dealing with the situation?
- What does your child do when s/he is not at school during the week/at weekends?
- Have there been any changes or significant events recently?
- Parent/carer beliefs about the problem – what does your husband/wife/partner think about it?
- Does your son/daughter tell you why s/he doesn't want to go to school?

Information from school (member of staff who knows the pupil best)

- How would you describe X – what are his/her strengths and weaknesses?

- Have there been any changes of school or class recently?

- Academic engagement– does the pupil have any Special Educational Needs?

- Social skills and friendships – could bullying or unfair treatment be happening?

- What is your understanding of his/her school attendance difficulties?

Other Agencies

- Are any other professionals involved e.g. school nurse, EP, EWMHS?

Hypothesis (combining the above information)

- Summary of the key interacting factors contributing to/maintaining the attendance difficulties

- Main function(s) identified using the School Attendance Difficulties Questionnaires if used...

Function 1: Avoidance of school-based stimuli that provoke negative emotions e.g. anxiety or depression

Function 2: Avoidance of aversive social or evaluative situations in school e.g. bullying or social anxiety

Function 3: Pursuit of attention from significant others at home e.g. parent (including separation anxiety)

Function 4: Pursuit of tangible reinforcement or rewards outside of school e.g. watching television or shopping

2. School Attendance Difficulties Assessment Form

Pupil

Date of birth

Year group

School

Date completed

Completed by

Description of school absence

Developmental history

Information from pupil

Information from family

Information from school (member of staff who knows the pupil best)

Information from other agencies

Hypothesis (combining the above information)

Function 1: Avoidance of school-based stimuli that provoke negative emotions e.g. anxiety or depression

Function 2: Avoidance of aversive social or evaluative situations in school e.g. bullying or social anxiety

Function 3: Pursuit of attention from significant others at home e.g. parent/carer (including separation anxiety)

Function 4: Pursuit of tangible reinforcement or rewards outside of school e.g. watching television or shopping

3. School Attendance Difficulties Rating Scale – pupil version

Name

Date of birth

Year group

School

Date

Completed with

Young people sometimes have different reasons for not going to school. Some feel uncomfortable at school, some have trouble with other people, some want to be with their family, and some prefer to do things more fun outside of school.

This form asks questions about why you sometimes don't go to school.

For each question, pick one number that describes you best for the last few days. Answer all the questions. There are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers.

Tick the number that best fits the way you feel.

	Never 0	1	2	Half the time 3	4	5	Always 6
1. How often do you have uncomfortable feelings about going to school because you are afraid of something in school (e.g. tests, fire alarm, a teacher)?							

	Never 0	1	2	Half the time 3	4	5	Always 6
2. How often do you stay away from school because it is hard to speak with the other kids at school?							
3. How often do you feel you would rather be with your family than go to school?							
4. When you are not in school during the week (Mon to Fri) how often do you leave the house to do something fun?							
5. How often do you stay away from school because you will have uncomfortable feelings (e.g. sad or worried) if you go?							
6. How often do you stay away from school because you feel embarrassed in front of other people at school?							
7. How often do you think about your parents/carers or other family members when in school?							
8. When you are not in school during the week (Mon to Fri) how often do you talk to or see people other than your family?							
9. How often do you feel worse at school (e.g. scared, nervous, or sad) compared to how you feel at home with friends?							
10. How often do you stay away from school because you do not have many friends there?							
11. How much would you rather be with your mum/dad/family than go to school?							

	Never 0	1	2	Half the time 3	4	5	Always 6
12. When you are not in school during the week (Mon to Fri) how much do you enjoy doing different things (e.g. being with friends, going out shopping)?							
13. How often do you have uncomfortable feelings about school (e.g. scared, nervous, sad) when you think about school on Saturday and Sunday?							
14. How often do you stay away from certain places in school (e.g. corridors or places where certain people are) where you would have to talk to someone?							
15. How much would you rather be taught by your family at home than by your teachers at school?							
16. How often do you refuse to go to school because you want to have fun outside of school?							
17. If you had fewer uncomfortable feelings (e.g. scared, nervous, sad) about school, how much easier would it be for you to go to school?							
18. If it were easier for you to make new friends, how much easier would it be for you to go to school?							
19. How much easier would it be easier for you to go to school if your family went with you?							
20. How much easier would it be for you to go to school if you could do more things you like to do after school (e.g. being with friends)?							

	Never			Half the time			Always
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6

21. How much more do you have uncomfortable feelings about school (e.g. scared, nervous, sad) compared to other people your age?

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

23. How much more than most people your age would you like to be at home with your mum/dad/family?

24. How much more than most people your age would you rather be doing fun things outside school?

Adapted from Kearney and Silverman's SRAS-R

Results

	Pupil Responses:				Parent Responses:			
	1.	2.	3.	4.	1.	2.	3.	4.
	5.	6.	7.	8.	5.	6.	7.	8.
	9.	10.	11.	12.	9.	10.	11.	12.
	13.	14.	15.	16.	13.	14.	15.	16.
	17.	18.	19.	20.	17.	18.	19.	20.
	21.	22.	23.	24.	21.	22.	23.	24.
Total								
Mean								
Rank								

4. School Attendance Difficulties Rating Scale – parent version

Pupil's name

Pupil's date of birth

Pupil's year group

Completed by

Relationship to pupil

Date

Young people sometimes have different reasons for not going to school. Some feel uncomfortable at school, some have trouble with other people, some want to be with their family, and some prefer to do things more fun outside of school.

This form asks questions about why your child sometimes doesn't want to go to school. Please answer all the questions below without discussing them with your child (because this could affect the responses they give on their own version of the questionnaire).

For each question, tick one number that you think describes your child best for the last few days.

	Never 0	1	2	Half the time 3	4	5	Always 6
1. How often does your child have uncomfortable feelings about going to school because they are afraid of something in school (e.g. tests, fire alarm, a teacher)?							

LET'S TALK... We Miss You

	Never 0	1	2	Half the time 3	4	5	Always 6
2. How often does your son/daughter stay away from school because it is hard for them to speak to other students?							
3. How often does your son/daughter feel they would rather be with you or another family member than go to school?							
4. When your son/daughter is not in school during the week (Mon to Fri) how often do they leave the house to do something fun?							
5. How often does your son/daughter stay away from school because they will feel uncomfortable (e.g. sad or worried) if they go?							
6. How often does your son/daughter stay away from school because they feel embarrassed in front of other people at school?							
7. How often does your son/daughter think about you or other family members when in school?							
8. When your son/daughter is not in school during the week (Mon to Fri) how often do they talk to or see people other than family?							
9. How often does your son/daughter feel worse at school (e.g. scared, nervous, sad) compared to how they feel at home or with friends?							
10. How often does your son/daughter stay away from school because they do not have many friends there?							

	Never 0	1	2	Half the time 3	4	5	Always 6
11. How much would your son/daughter rather be with you or other family members than go to school?							
12. When your son/daughter is not in school during the week (Mon to Fri) how much do they enjoy doing different things (e.g. being with friends, going out)?							
13. How often does your son/daughter have uncomfortable feelings about school (e.g. scared, nervous, sad) when they think about school on Sat and Sun?							
14. How often does your son/daughter stay away from certain places in school (e.g. corridors or places where certain people are) where they would have to talk to someone?							
15. How much would your son/daughter rather be taught by you or your partner at home than by their teachers at school?							
16. How often does your son/daughter refuse to go to school because they want to have fun outside of school?							
17. If your son/daughter had fewer uncomfortable feelings (e.g. scared, nervous, sad) about school how much easier would it be easier for them to go to school?							
18. If it were easier for your son/daughter to make new friends, would it be easier for them to go to school?							

	Never 0	1	2	Half the time 3	4	5	Always 6
19. How much easier would it be for your son/daughter to go to school if you or your partner went with them?							
20. How much easier would it be for your son/daughter to go to school if they could do more things they like to do after school (e.g. being with friends)?							
21. How much more does your son/ daughter have uncomfortable feelings about school (e.g. scared, nervous, sad) compared to other people their age?							
22. How often does your son/ daughter stay away from people at school compared to other pupils their age?							
23. How much more than most people their age would your son/ daughter like to be at home with you or your family?							
24. How much more than most people their age would your son/ daughter rather be doing fun things outside school?							

Adapted from Kearney and Silverman's SRAS-R

Results: Record parental responses on pupil questionnaire sheet

How to score the School Attendance Difficulties Assessment Scales

Record the rating given for each question in the table at the end of the pupil version. Add up the scores for each column and find the (mean) average by dividing the total by the number of questions (this will be 6 if all questions have been answered).

The columns represent the 4 functions in order i.e.

Column 1: Avoidance of school-based stimuli that provoke negative emotions e.g. anxiety or depression

Column 2: Avoidance of aversive social or evaluative situations in school e.g. bullying or social anxiety

Column 3: Pursuit of attention from significant others at home e.g. parent (including separation anxiety)

Column 4: Pursuit of tangible reinforcement or rewards outside of school e.g. watching television or shopping

The (mean) average scores generated allow you to see which of the functions are more or less relevant for the pupil in question. They can be ranked in order from highest to lowest, with the higher scores meaning they are more likely to be a function contributing to that pupil's school attendance difficulties. Comparisons can also be made between pupil and parent/carer responses.

For further support with interpreting any assessment data and creating evidence-based hypotheses, please contact your Quadrant SEND Inclusion & Psychology team.

Essex County Council