



SCHOOL ANXIETY & NON-ATTENDANCE

## Emotionally Based School Avoidance

EBSA describes children and young people who have severe difficulty attending school because of emotional factors, often anxiety, leading to extended or recurring absence. It describes a need, not a diagnosis.

**i** EBSA is **not** truancy or 'naughtiness', and not a within-child 'disorder'. It is an understandable response to a mix of factors across school, home and the child. The term is preferred over 'school refusal' because most young people *want* to attend – 'can't', not 'won't'.

### **i** How it can present

- Reluctance, dread or visible distress about attending
- Physical symptoms on school mornings (tummy aches, headaches, nausea)
- Anxiety, panic or low mood, sometimes building the night before
- Patterns of lateness, sporadic attendance or missing particular lessons
- Distress easing once at home or when attendance is not required
- Difficulty putting the worry into words; often specific triggers

### **✓** What helps – supportive approaches

- ✓ Early identification – act on the first signs
- ✓ Understand the function and triggers *with* the young person
- ✓ A collaborative, flexible home-school plan with regular review
- ✓ Gradual, supported reintegration with achievable steps
- ✓ A key trusted adult and a safe space or exit card
- ✓ Reduce anxiety and address any underlying or unmet needs

### **📍** UK CONTEXT

~1–2%

An estimated 1–2% of pupils are absent mainly due to emotional factors; precise prevalence is hard to establish, and persistent absence has risen sharply since 2019.

*West Sussex EPS guidance; Anna Freud (context)*

### **✦** Strengths often seen

- ✦ Often sensitive, perceptive and emotionally aware
- ✦ Frequently conscientious, wanting to do well
- ✦ A strong sense of fairness and authenticity
- ✦ Capable and engaged when anxiety is reduced
- ✦ Warm, trusting relationships with a key adult or friend

### **📍** Finding assessment & support in the UK

- 1 Talk to the school first – form tutor, pastoral lead or SENCo
- 2 GP for advice and to rule out any underlying health issues
- 3 NHS CAMHS or a Mental Health Support Team in school
- 4 Educational Psychology via school or the local authority; EHCP where there is underlying SEN
- 5 Young Minds and Anna Freud offer parent resources and support

**Please note** – this sheet provides general information only. It is not a diagnostic tool and is not a substitute for individual assessment or professional advice. Every person is unique; if you have concerns about yourself or a child, please speak with a suitably qualified professional.

**Sources & further information:** West Sussex EPS · Anna Freud Centre · Young Minds · BPS