



# Emotionally based school avoidance policy

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## **Statement of Intent**

Rattlesden Primary Academy recognises that regular attendance is essential for raising educational standards and for ensuring that all pupils fulfil their potential.

The school understands that there are instances when pupils who have emotional and mental health needs may find it difficult to attend their classes or the school altogether. We are committed to valuing, respecting and understanding pupils with emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA), and will provide continuous, professional support to these pupils.

The main aims of this policy are:

- To provide all necessary and required support, details and information for pupils with EBSA.
- To ensure that staff are educated on emotional and mental health to encourage early identification and support.
- To create and foster a learning environment which is free from bullying and harassment.

### **Legal Framework**

This policy has due regard to the following legislation including, but not limited to:

- Equality Act 2010
- Mental Health Act 1983, as amended in 2007

This policy also has due regard to the following guidance:

- DfE (2018) 'Mental health and behaviour in schools'

This policy is implemented in conjunction with the following policies:

- Attendance Policy
- Behaviour Policy
- Positive Mental health and Wellbeing Policy
- Anti-bullying Policy
- Equality and disability Policy

### **Roles and Responsibilities**

The governing body is responsible for:

- Ensuring that the school community recognises EBSA as a significant emotional health issue.
- Ensuring appropriate support measures are in place for pupils with EBSA.
- In liaison with the headteacher, determine the need for commissioned support.

The headteacher is responsible for:

- Establishing and communicating procedures for attendance monitoring.
- Ensuring that bullying incidents relating to pupils with EBSA are dealt with in the same manner as other bullying incidents.
- In liaison with the governing board, determine the need for commissioned support.

The SENDco and Mental Health Lead is responsible for:

- Overseeing the pastoral team.
- Liaising with external support, such as children and young people's mental health services (CYPMHS).

Our Learning Mentor/SENDco and SLT are responsible for:

- Determining and documenting pupils' emotional triggers.
- Liaising with parents of pupils with EBSA on a regular basis.
- Supporting pupils during the school day
- Working together with staff, parent and child

Parents are responsible for:

- Working with the school to ensure the best educational outcomes for their child.

### **Definitions**

The discourse and terminology surrounding school non-attendance has continually been evolving in response to emerging literature and research findings. Previous terms include 'school phobia', 'school refusal', 'school withdrawal' and 'truancy' (Kearney, 2008, Pellegrini, 2007). More recent definitions used within practice include 'emotionally based school avoidance' as coined by West Sussex Educational Psychology (2018). See definitions below:

Truancy: 'generally refers to unexcused, illegal, surreptitious absences, non-anxiety based absenteeism, absenteeism linked to lack of parental knowledge about the behaviour, absenteeism linked to delinquency or academic problems, or absenteeism linked to social conditions such as homelessness or poverty' (Kearney, 2008, p.452)

School phobia: 'generally refers to fear based absenteeism, but youths are rarely phobic of school and so this term has been deemphasized in recent research literature (Hanna, Fischer, & Fluent, 2006; Suveg, Aschenbrand, and Kendall, 2005)' (Kearney, 2008, p.453).

School withdrawal: where parents deliberately keep a child home from school for economic purposes, to conceal maltreatment, to prevent abduction from an estranged spouse, to protect a child from perceived school-based threat, to assist a parent with psychopathology, or for other reasons (Kearney, Lemos and Silverman, 2004)' (Kearney, 2008, p.452)

School refusal: 'generally refers to anxiety-based absenteeism, often from separation, generalized, or social anxiety' (Kearney, 2008, p.452). School refusal is a psychosocial phenomenon defined by a prolonged absence from school, with parents'/carers' knowledge, and the prospect of going to school causing severe distress (Maynard et al, 2015, Berg, 1997). Kearney and Silverman (1993) proposed school refusal occurs when children experience lowered anxiety through avoidance of the school setting, which results in negative reinforcement.

Emotionally based school avoidance: a 'broad umbrella term used to describe a group of children and young people who have severe difficulty in attending school due to emotional factors, often resulting in prolonged absences from school' (West Sussex Guidance, 2018, p.3).

For the purpose of this policy, EBSA is the manifestation of internal problems, such as fear, anxiety, misery, and feeling ill without obvious cause, which affects a pupil's willingness to leave their home and/or attend an educational environment.

Pupils who have experienced emotional trauma may display some signs of EBSA. The school recognises this link and supports pupils experiencing emotional trauma to attend school regularly.

EBSA differs from truancy such that there are underlying emotional and anxiety issues which cause the individual to be absent from school. Contrastively, truant behaviour displays anti-social behaviour and an unwillingness to learn.

It is important that schools are able to identify instances of EBSA and can differentiate this from truancy; however, three potential overlaps between EBSA and truancy have been identified for reasons of non-attendance. These include:

- Problems with specific teachers or lessons.
- Complexity of primary and secondary education.
- Being bullied and in isolation.

Though some instances of EBSA are not always clearly identifiable, it can be commonly recognised by:

- A pattern of absence from school which may lead to prolonged absence.
- Anxiety or fear which is presented as a reluctance to attend school.
- Common complaints of feeling unwell and requesting to leave the classroom.
- Challenging behaviour, for example physical aggression
- Social isolation.
- Expressing a desire to attend classes but not doing so.
- Under-achievement of learning potential.
- Physical indicators, e.g. sweating, sickness, rapid weight loss or gain.

### **Whole School Approaches to Mental Health and Wellbeing**

At Rattlesden Primary School we aim to create an environment and policies that adopt whole school, evidence-based approaches to promote wellness enhancing, resilient environments and reduce the likelihood of EBSA concerns emerging.

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) advises that school settings should be supported to adopt a comprehensive 'whole school' approach to promoting the social and emotional wellbeing of children and young people. Such an approach moves beyond teaching and learning to be incorporated in all aspects of school life. Mental wellbeing is not simply the absence of mental illness but is a broader indicator of social, emotional and physical wellness. The Anna Freud Centre defines mental wellbeing as 'children and young people's happiness, life satisfaction and positive functioning'.

Public Health England (2015) highlighted eight principles to promoting whole school approaches to emotional health and well-being, and builds on the mental health Wheel of Resilience.



### **Leadership and Management**

Support from the senior leadership team is essential to ensuring the efforts to promote emotional health and well-being are accepted and embedded. NICE recommends that head teachers, governors and teachers should demonstrate a commitment to the social and emotional wellbeing of young people. They should provide leadership in this area by ensuring social and emotional wellbeing features within improvement plans, policies, systems and activities. These should all be monitored and evaluated.

School leaders have an important role in advocating for the needs of children and learners within the context of wider local strategic planning.

### **School Ethos and Environment**

The physical, social and emotional environment in which staff and CYP spend a high proportion of each weekday has been shown to affect their physical, emotional and mental health and wellbeing as well as impacting on attainment.

Relationships between staff and CYP, and between CYP are critical in promoting CYP wellbeing and in helping to engender a sense of belonging.

At Rattlesden school we:

- create an ethos and conditions that foster supportive and trusting relationships which are essential for successful learning.
- provide an emotionally secure and safe environment that prevents any form of bullying or violence

- Collaboration with parent/carers

### **Curriculum, Teaching and Learning**

School-based programmes of social and emotional learning have the potential to help children acquire the skills they need to make good academic progress as well as benefit children's health and wellbeing. Children are more likely to engage in lessons that focus on emotional wellbeing if they are of practical application and relevant to them.

Teaching of EBSA and mental health issues will be incorporated into PSHE lessons to promote an accepting, understanding attitude from other pupils, and to prevent any bullying incidents.

The school will educate pupils about EBSA, in order to give them the confidence to approach a member of staff and request support.

NICE guidance recommends that:

Primary education providers:

- include a curriculum that integrates the development of social and emotional skills within all subject areas (these skills include problem-solving, coping, conflict management/ resolution and understanding and managing feelings)

### **Pupil's Voice**

We believe that involving children in decisions that impact on them can benefit their emotional health and wellbeing by helping them to feel part of the school and wider community and to have some control over their lives (sense of belonging and sense of mastery). At an individual level, benefits include helping children to gain belief in their own capabilities, including building their knowledge and skills to make healthy choice and developing their independence.

### **Staff Development, Health and Wellbeing**

It is important for staff to access training to increase their knowledge of emotional wellbeing and to equip them to be able to identify mental health difficulties in their pupils. This includes being able to refer them to relevant support either within the school or from external services. Promoting staff health and wellbeing is also an integral principle of the whole school approach to emotional health and wellbeing.

As a school we welcome staff training and support in how to develop children's social, emotional and psychological wellbeing. We also train and develop staff so that they have the knowledge, understanding and skills to deliver a curriculum that integrates the development of social and emotional skills within all subject areas effectively. The training includes how to manage behaviours and how to build successful relationships.

Staff are also trained to identify and assess the early signs of anxiety, emotional distress and behavioural problems among primary school children. They should also be able to assess whether a specialist should be involved and make an appropriate request.

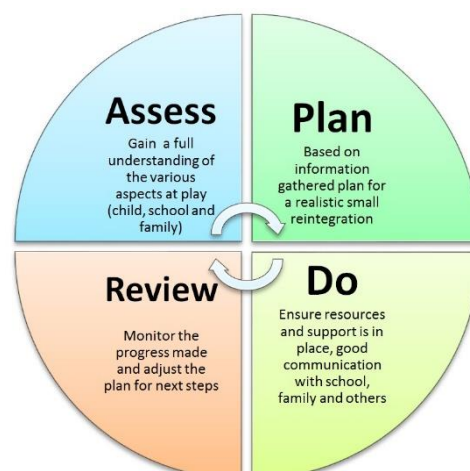
### **Getting Help**

Awareness, curiosity and recognition

As a staff team, it is important that there is a shared understanding and awareness of EBSA indicators, so that pupils at risk of EBSA can be identified as early as possible so that effective support can be put in place. It may be that the child may present with few or many different indicators of EBSA. Please see table below which outlines some possible early indicators of EBSA (those you may notice before the child’s patterns of behaviour become entrenched) and indicators of EBSA (those you may notice once the child’s patterns of behaviour are more established).

Early indicators of EBSA	Indicators of EBSA
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sporadic attendance and/or lateness</li> <li>• Parent reporting that the child does not want to come to school</li> <li>• Physical signs of stress believed to be linked to stress (e.g. stomach ache, sickness, headache) or complaining of feeling ill.</li> <li>• Behavioural changes or fluctuations e.g. interactions with others, reduced motivation and engagement in learning tasks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Periods of prolonged absence</li> <li>• Persistent lateness</li> <li>• Parent/carer unable to support child to attend school</li> <li>• Identifiable patterns within non-school attendance e.g. specific days, subjects, staff members</li> <li>• Providing minor reasons for school absences</li> <li>• Child experiences anxiety in relation to home factors e.g. parental separation, divorce, conflict, loss, bereavement</li> <li>• Child displays greater reliance upon family members e.g. separation anxiety, increased proximity</li> <li>• Concerns around academic progress due to non-school attendance / missed education</li> <li>• Child displays increased anxiety in relation to their learning and/or poor self-concept as a learner</li> <li>• Low self-esteem and/or lack of confidence</li> <li>• Struggling in relation to peer relationships and/or social situations</li> <li>• Physical signs of stress believed to be linked to stress (e.g. stomach ache, sickness, headache) or complaining of feeling ill.</li> <li>• Displays of emotional dysregulation and/or distress</li> </ul>

Where risks of emotionally based school avoidance are identified, it is important to gather further information from the child, families and school staff and put in place strategies to support them as soon as possible. Fast action can prevent emotionally based school avoidance from becoming entrenched and result in much better outcomes. At Rattlesden Primary School we follow the assess, plan, do and review cycles with the young person at the centre of the planning and interventions.



Assess: Information Gathering

Once there has been a difficulty identified there should be a prompt information gathering process to explore reasons for the difficulties. The main aims of this are to gather information regarding the various child, family



and school factors that may be contributing to the emotionally based school avoidance experienced by the child.

### Working with the Child

Once it has been identified that a child is displaying indicators of EBSA, it is important that staff begin to gather further information regarding the child's thoughts, feelings and wishes so that any support or intervention can be tailored and personalised accordingly. Remember that any child currently avoiding school will become anxious when asked to discuss returning; they are managing their feelings of anxiety by employing avoidant behaviour, so any talk about going back will raise their anxiety as you are proposing taking away their coping mechanism. Always a good place to start is to acknowledge it will be difficult, but you would like to know how they think and feel. It is important that the adult working with them does not dismiss anxieties or worries.

This information gathering and then a proposed action will be carried out by the school's Mental Health Lead (Learning Mentor). The action plan will be shared and agreed with child, school and parents.

### Working with Families

It is important that time is taken to build collaborative partnerships working together with families in the best interests of the young person. Families may find it difficult to talk about the concerns they have and the difficulties they experience in getting their child to school. During the initial meeting it is important to gather background information, establish the current situation and the family's views. There should be regular contact with families throughout the assess, plan, do and review cycles and schools should identify a key person to communicate with parents.

### Working with school staff

It is essential that representatives from schools seek information from members of staff who work most closely with the child or young person. We all respond differently according to the environment, situations or task and with different people. Each member of staff may have valuable information to help identify triggers for anxiety and strategies the child responds positively to. In particular it is important to seek out the views of any members of staff the young person speaks positively about and any member of staff where relationships may be more difficult.

Key information to gather includes:

- The young person's strengths?
- What is going well?
- Any difficulties they have noticed
- Peer relationships
- Relationships with adults
- Response to academic tasks
- If they have witnessed emotional distress what did this look like and what caused it.
- What support or differentiation is put in place and how the young person responds to this?
- Any ideas for further support.

### **Formulating an Understanding of the Behaviour**

Following the gathering of information from the child, family, school and other professionals involved it is important that 'sense' is made of it. In other words, an overview of the whole picture

and various factors are obtained and potential formulations or hypotheses regarding the behaviour are formed. These should then inform the intervention and return to school support plan. In order to understand the cause of EBSA, we must consider the child's underlying needs and how these may be contributing towards their presenting behaviour. It can be helpful to consider what the function of the behaviour is and what it may be communicating. Try to separate behaviours from feelings and underlying needs.

### **Intervention Planning and Delivery**

#### *Early Action*

- Listen to the pupil
- Listen to the parent
- Listen to all staff who interact with the pupil
  - Look for patterns – Relationship awareness
  - *With peers*
  - *With staff*
  - *With parents(s)*
- Look for triggers – sensory awareness
  - Sights
  - Sounds
  - Textures
  - Space
  - Smells
- Look at the classroom environment
  - Is work too hard
  - Is progress being made
  - Are resources being provided to support learning such as visuals
  - Does pupil have a good understanding of tasks expected of them

It will be the expectation that all these communications will be recorded in a meeting with the class teacher, parent, pupil and the SENDCO or Headteacher. From this meeting an action plane will be devised and early intervention strategies will be discussed.

#### *Early Intervention*

- Safe person to talk to
- Safe place to go
- Signalling worries
- Break System
- Allowing calming activities
- Address issues arising from monitoring
- Specific interventions
- Meet and greet
- Preparing for change (social story support)
- Basic stress management techniques
- Refer to wellbeing principles

These interventions will be recorded in the action plan and time allocations will be identified.

### *Action Plans*

After the information gathering and analysis process has occurred an Action plan should be co-produced with parents, the child and any other professionals involved with outcomes that focus on the child remaining in school or returning to school. The outcomes on the action plan should be individual to that child and therefore each plan will be different. The outcomes should be realistic and achievable with the aim of reintegrating the young person. The return should be gradual and graded. A part time timetable may be necessary as part of this process but this should always be temporary and not seen as a long term option as all children are entitled to a full time education. An optimistic approach should be taken, if the child fails to attend or carry out the actions as described in the action plan one day, start again the next day. It should be anticipated that there is likely to be more difficulties following a weekend, illness or school holiday.

At the start of the plan the child is likely to show more distress and everyone involved should be aware of this and work together to agree firm, consistent approaches. A unified approach is recommended between all involved and any concerns should be communicated away from the child.

### **Getting More Help**

When there has been limited or no progress in response to targeted intervention over time, following the plan, do, review process, it is advised to seek psychological support. The appropriate service to refer to depends upon the individual needs of the child.

#### Next Steps

- Review with all parties
- Make any further adjustments
- Review Again
- Consider referrals: SES, GP, Educational Welfare Officer
- Primary Mental Health Worker Consultation Line
- Mental Health in Schools Team (NHS)
- Early Help Services

#### Increasing Support

- Part time timetable (agreed with parents)
- Bespoke package of support
- Activities in line with pupil's interest
- Sensory activities
- Use of outside space
- Alternative Provision Directory
- Keeping links with home open
- Alternative Tuition Service

### **Bullying Incidents**

The school has zero tolerance for any bullying incidents towards pupils with EBSA.

The school will follow the Behaviour Policy

Any occurrence of bullying will be reported to a member of school staff. These incidents will be dealt with following the process in our Anti-Bullying Policy.

## **Monitoring and Review**

The headteacher, in conjunction with the TA and SENDco, will review this policy on an annual basis and make any necessary changes.

The next scheduled review date is January 2026

All members of staff are required to familiarise themselves with this policy as part of their induction programme.

## **Where to get information and support**

For support on specific mental health needs

Anxiety UK [www.anxietyuk.org.uk](http://www.anxietyuk.org.uk) OCD UK [www.ocduk.org](http://www.ocduk.org)

Depression Alliance [www.depressoinalliance.org](http://www.depressoinalliance.org)

Eating Disorders [www.b-eat.co.uk](http://www.b-eat.co.uk) and [www.inourhands.com](http://www.inourhands.com)

National Self-Harm Network [www.nshn.co.uk](http://www.nshn.co.uk) [www.selfharm.co.uk](http://www.selfharm.co.uk)

Suicidal thoughts Prevention of young suicide UK – POPYRUS: [www.papyrus-uk.org](http://www.papyrus-uk.org)

For general information and support

[www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk) champions young people's mental health and wellbeing

[www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk) advice and support on mental health problems

[www.minded.org.uk](http://www.minded.org.uk) (e-learning)

[www.time-to-change.org.uk](http://www.time-to-change.org.uk) tackles the stigma of mental health

[www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org) challenges attitudes towards mental health

<https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/children-families-and-learning/wellbeing-for-education-return/ebsa-emotionally-based-school-avoidance> For local information