DENBY FREE COFE VA PRIMARY SCHOOL

Our approach to supporting pupil experiencing EBSA

Understanding the Core of EBSA

1. What exactly is EBSA?

Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) is a broad "umbrella term" used to describe children who have severe difficulty attending school due to emotional factors.

- **Rooted in Anxiety:** Unlike truancy, where a child might be out without their parents' knowledge, EBSA is rooted in fear and anxiety.
- **A Coping Strategy:** It is not a diagnosis; rather, it is a description of a pattern of behaviour or a coping strategy the child is using to manage overwhelming feelings.
- **Internal Struggle:** Often, children experiencing EBSA actually *want* to attend school but feel physically and emotionally unable to do so.

2. Spotting the Early Signs

Identifying EBSA early is key to preventing it from becoming "entrenched". Look out for:

- **Physical Symptoms:** Complaints of tummy aches, headaches, or nausea, especially on school mornings or Sunday nights.
- **Changes in Attendance:** Arriving late, missing specific lessons, or a pattern of being "too ill" after weekends or holidays.
- **Emotional Distress:** Crying, pleading, or becoming defensive/aggressive when school is mentioned.
- **Separation Anxiety:** Unusual distress when leaving parents/carers at the school gate.

3. Why is it happening? (The 4 Functions)

Psychologists often look at the "function" of the behaviour—what is the child getting (or avoiding) by staying home?

1. **To avoid uncomfortable feelings:** Escaping the general physical sensations of anxiety felt at school.
2. **To escape social or evaluative stress:** Avoiding tests, public speaking, or difficult peer interactions.
3. **To reduce separation anxiety:** Staying home to stay close to a primary caregiver.
4. **To pursue "tangible reinforcers":** Enjoying the comforts of home, such as gaming or one-on-one time with a parent.

4. The Anxiety Cycle

Understanding this cycle is vital. When a child feels anxious about school and stays home, their anxiety immediately drops—this is called "short-term relief". However, because they haven't faced the "threat," the fear grows larger in their mind, making it even harder to go in the next day.



Building Resilience: The "Push and Pull" of School Attendance

While it is important to understand the risks, it is equally vital to identify and build upon **resilience factors** (sometimes called protective factors). These are the strengths and supports that help "push" a child towards attending school and help them cope when things feel difficult.

The Push and Pull Analogy

It can be helpful to think of school attendance as a balance between "Push" and "Pull" factors:

- **"Pull" Factors (Risks):** These are the things that pull a child *away* from school (e.g., anxiety, bullying, or feeling safe only at home).
- **"Push" Factors (Resilience):** These are the things that push a child *towards* school (e.g., a favourite subject, a trusted adult, or a good friend).

When the "Pull" factors become stronger than the "Push" factors, EBSA is more likely to occur. Our goal is to work together to strengthen the "Push" factors at home and at school.

Resilience Factors at Home

Supportive factors within the family can make a huge difference in how a child feels about school:

- **Valuing Education:** Talking positively about school and learning in front of your child.
- **Strong Communication:** Maintaining a good, open relationship with school staff and external professionals.
- **Emotional Safety:** A stable home environment where the child feels secure and has a close bond with family members.
- **Routine:** Siblings attending school consistently can provide a helpful sense of "normalcy" and routine.

Resilience Factors at School

A child is more likely to feel they can attend when they have:

- **Trusted Relationships:** At least one positive, "attuned" relationship with a member of staff and a good group of friends.

- **A "Safe Space":** Knowing there is a specific, quiet place they can go if they feel overwhelmed during the day.
- **Flexibility:** When school is willing to adapt, such as changing a timetable or allowing a different entrance to be used.
- **Belonging:** Feeling that they are a valued part of the school community, even if they aren't there every day.

Resilience Factors within the Child

Every child has internal strengths we can nurture:

- **Interests and Hobbies:** Having activities they enjoy outside of school that build their confidence.
- **Aspirations:** Having dreams for the future or a desire to achieve specific goals.
- **Self-Awareness:** Being able to recognise their own strengths and use strategies to help manage their big feelings.
- **Being Heard:** The child feeling that their views are genuinely listened to and taken seriously by the adults around them.



Supporting a Child with or Awaiting an Autism Diagnosis

When a child is awaiting an autism diagnosis, it can be a period of significant uncertainty for both you and them. It is important to remember that **you do not need a formal diagnosis to begin implementing support strategies**. Early intervention is crucial in preventing EBSA from becoming a long-term pattern.

1. Understanding "Masking"

Many children, particularly girls, become experts at "masking"—trying to "fit in" by copying the social behaviours of their peers.

- **The School Day:** At school, a child might appear to be "coping" or "fine" because they are internalising their stress and anxiety to avoid standing out.
- **The Home "Aftershock":** Because masking requires an enormous amount of mental energy, the child often reaches their limit by the time they get home. This can lead to what is sometimes called a "meltdown" or total exhaustion in the evening, as they finally feel safe enough to release the built-up tension from the day.

2. Sensory Processing Needs

For many neurodiverse children, the world can be an overwhelming place. Sensory differences can significantly contribute to school avoidance.

- **In School:** Noises in the corridor, the smell of the canteen, or the feel of a specific school uniform can be physically painful or highly distressing.
- **At Home:** Your child may seek out "sensory refuge"—quiet, dark, or familiar spaces where they can regulate their senses.
- **How to help:** Look for "reasonable adjustments" such as wearing a soft version of the uniform, using earplugs in busy areas, or having a "pass" to leave a classroom five minutes early to avoid crowded hallways.

3. Differences in Social Communication

Autistic children often have a very literal understanding of language.

- **Literal Thinking:** A simple instruction from a teacher might be misinterpreted, leading to high anxiety about "doing it wrong".
- **Eye Contact:** Forcing eye contact can be physically uncomfortable and may actually make it harder for the child to listen to what is being said.

- **Social Fatigue:** Navigating friendships and unstructured times (like break or lunch) can be more exhausting than the lessons themselves.

4. The Impact of Uncertainty

Anxiety often stems from a fear of the unknown. For a child awaiting a diagnosis, the "rules" of the world might feel unpredictable.

- **Predictability:** Children benefit from a clear, consistent environment. Using visual timetables or talking through the "plan" for the day at home can help reduce the anxiety of the "unknown".
- **Validation:** While waiting for an assessment, focus on validating their experience. Instead of saying "there's nothing to worry about," try saying, "I can see that this feels very loud/difficult for you right now. Let's think how we can make it feel safer".

5. A "No-Label" Approach to Support

The strategies that help autistic children—such as clear communication, sensory adjustments, and quiet spaces—are often helpful for *all* children experiencing EBSA. Schools can start making these adjustments immediately based on the child's identified needs rather than waiting for a specific label.



Understanding Sensory Processing and EBSA

Many children who experience EBSA, particularly those who are neurodiverse or awaiting an autism diagnosis, process sensory information differently. This means their brains may be over-sensitive (hypersensitive) or under-sensitive (hyposensitive) to the world around them.

When a child's sensory system is constantly under attack, school feels like an unsafe and painful place to be.

1. The Eight Senses

We often think of the five main senses (sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch), but there are three "hidden" senses that are often involved in EBSA:

- **Vestibular (Balance):** Knowing where your head is in space.
- **Proprioception (Body Awareness):** Knowing where your body parts are and how much pressure to use.
- **Interoception (Internal Sensations):** Feeling things like hunger, thirst, or the physical "fluttery" feelings of anxiety.

2. Sensory Factors at School

The school environment is often a "sensory minefield" that can lead to physical exhaustion and "sensory dread."

- **Auditory (Sound):** The sudden, piercing sound of the school bell, the echo in the sports hall, or the constant hum of a projector.
- **Visual:** Flickering fluorescent lights, busy displays on every wall, and the "visual noise" of hundreds of moving people in corridors.
- **Tactile (Touch):** The "itchy" feeling of a woollen school jumper, the physical contact of being bumped in the queue, or the texture of glue and paint in art.
- **Olfactory (Smell):** Strong smells from the school kitchen or the overwhelming scent of perfumes and deodorants in the changing rooms.

3. Sensory Factors at Home

Because your child spends all day trying to manage this sensory overload, home is often where the "Sensory Cup" overflows.

- **The "Sensory Cup" Concept:** Imagine your child has a cup. Every loud noise or bright light at school adds a drop of water. By the end of the school day, the cup is full to the brim. When they get home, a small request (like "please take your shoes off") can be the final drop that causes the cup to overflow into a meltdown.
- **Decompressing:** Your child may need "low-arousal" time immediately after school—sitting in a dark room, using a weighted blanket, or having total silence—to let their sensory system reset.

4. Practical Support and Adjustments

You don't need a diagnosis to start making the environment feel safer. You can work with the school to try these "Reasonable Adjustments":

- **Sensory Audit:** Ask the school to do a walk-through with your child (when it's quiet) to identify which areas feel "scary" or "loud."
- **Uniform Flexibility:** Allow your child to wear seamless socks, leggings under skirts, or soft cotton shirts. Removing labels from clothing can also make a huge difference.
- **Ear Defenders or Plugs:** Using noise-cancelling headphones or discrete earplugs (like "Loops") in busy areas like the canteen or hallways.
- **A "Sensory Circuit":** Some children benefit from a planned series of physical activities (jumping, pushing, or stretching) at the start of the day to help "organise" their sensory system for learning.
- **Visual Timetables:** Reducing the sensory "surprise" by showing exactly what is happening and when, which helps lower the overall anxiety levels.



The Power of Connection: Maintaining Relationships

Relationships are the foundation of a child's sense of safety and belonging. For a child experiencing EBSA, staying connected—both to you at home and to their community at school—is one of the most effective ways to reduce anxiety and build resilience.

1. Staying Connected to Home (While at School)

Many children feel a deep sense of separation anxiety when they are apart from their "safe person". You can help them feel your presence even when you aren't there through "transitional objects" or small rituals:

- **Transitional Objects:** These are small items that offer security and remind your child of you. This could be a keyring, a small stone, or even a tissue with a familiar perfume on it.
- **The "Heart Button":** You and your child can draw a small heart on your wrists. If they feel "wobbly" during the day, they can press the heart to "send" a message of love to you, knowing you have the same heart on your arm.
- **A Lifeline to Home:** If your child worries about things happening at home (e.g., a family member being unwell), they may feel their phone is a "lifeline". While schools often have "no phone" policies, you can ask for a reasonable adjustment where they have a set time to call or message you from the school office to check in.

2. Staying Connected to School (While at Home)

If your child is currently unable to attend school, it is vital that they don't feel "forgotten". Maintaining a sense of belonging makes the eventual return feel much less daunting.

- **Check-ins with a "Key Adult":** Your child should have one trusted person at school who checks in regularly. This doesn't have to be a formal meeting; it could be a quick "safe and well" message or a "thumbs up" video.
- **Video Messages:** Seeing a familiar face can help. Ask the school if a teacher can send a short video reading a story, or if friends can record a quick message about what they did that day.
- **Peer Relationships:** For many young people, especially those who find face-to-face socialising difficult, gaming and social media are vital tools for maintaining friendships while they are at home. Encouraging these digital connections can prevent your child from becoming socially isolated.

3. The Relationship Between You and the School

Your child looks to you to know who they can trust. If you feel anxious, blamed, or unheard by the school, your child will sense that the school is not a "safe" place for them.

- **A "No-Blame" Partnership:** Successful support happens when parents and school staff work together as a team. You should feel genuinely listened to and your expert knowledge of your child should be valued.
- **A Single Point of Contact:** To reduce your own stress, identify one "key adult" at the school who is your main point of contact. This prevents you from having to repeat your story to multiple people and ensures clear communication.

4. Why Relationships Matter for Neurodiverse Children

For a girl awaiting an autism diagnosis, relationships often look different. She may struggle with the "unspoken rules" of the playground but find deep comfort in an "attuned" adult who understands her needs without her having to explain them.

- **Validation:** Simply having an adult say, "I can see this is hard, and I am here with you," provides a powerful sense of safety that can lower her overall anxiety.
- **Predictability:** Knowing exactly who will be there to meet her at the door or who she can go to when things get "too much" provides the predictability she needs to feel secure.



Practical Tools and Strategies for Home

Supporting a child with EBSA is about finding the right "toolbox" of strategies that help them feel safe and understood. These tools aren't about "fixing" the child, but about lowering their anxiety and making the transition between home and school feel more manageable.

1. Person-Centred Tools: Understanding Their World

Because it can be hard for a child to explain *why* they feel anxious, we can use visual tools to help them communicate.

- **The "Three Houses" Tool:** Ask your child to draw three houses.
    - **The House of Good Things:** What do they enjoy at school? (Friends, a specific club, a favourite subject).
    - **The House of Worries:** What feels "scary" or difficult? (The canteen, a specific teacher, the bus).
    - **The House of Dreams:** If they had a magic wand, what would school look like?
- **The "Ideal School" Activity:** Using Lego, drawing, or Minecraft, ask your child to build their "perfect" school. This helps you identify what is currently missing for them—for example, if their ideal school is very quiet, it suggests noise is a major factor at their real school.

2. Visual Supports: Reducing the "Mental Load"

For children awaiting an autism diagnosis, processing verbal information can be exhausting, especially when they are anxious. Visuals provide a "permanent" reminder of what is happening.

- **"Now and Next" Boards:** These simplify the day into manageable chunks. "Now: We are putting on shoes. Next: We are driving to the school gate." This prevents the child from feeling overwhelmed by the whole day ahead.
- **Visual Timetables:** Create a simple chart of the morning routine at home. Knowing exactly what happens—and in what order—provides a sense of "predictability" that lowers anxiety.
- **Countdowns:** Use a visual timer or a simple "5 minutes left" warning before transitions (like stopping a game to get ready for school).

3. Emotional Regulation: Grounding Techniques

When anxiety peaks (like on the Sunday night or the Monday morning), the "emotional brain" takes over. Grounding techniques help bring the child back to the present moment.

- **The 5-4-3-2-1 Technique:** Ask your child to name:
    - **5** things they can see.
    - **4** things they can touch.
    - **3** things they can hear.
    - **2** things they can smell.
    - **1** thing they can taste (or one thing they like about themselves).
- **Box Breathing:** Trace a square with a finger. Inhale for 4 counts along the top, hold for 4 down the side, exhale for 4 along the bottom, and hold for 4 up the other side.

4. The "Communication Bridge"

If your child is struggling to speak to teachers, create a "bridge" between home and school:

- **A Worry Box:** A physical box at home where they can post their school worries. You can then share these with the school's "key adult" so the child doesn't have to say them out loud.
- **Check-in Scales:** Use a 1-5 or a "Traffic Light" system (Red/Amber/Green) for them to show you how they are feeling each morning. This allows you to alert the school if they are arriving in the "Red" zone.

5. Scaffolding the Return

If your child has been off school, they don't have to jump back into a full day. Think about "micro-steps":

- **Drive-bys:** Driving past the school on a weekend.
- **The "Soft Landing":** Arranging for the child to arrive 10 minutes before the bell or 10 minutes after, to avoid the sensory overwhelm of the playground crowds.
- **Meet and Greets:** Ensuring their "trusted person" is waiting for them at a specific door so they don't have to navigate the entrance alone.

School Work at Home and Navigating Transitions

When a child is struggling to attend school, the pressure of keeping up with school work can often become an additional source of anxiety. Similarly, the many changes that happen throughout a school day can feel overwhelming. Understanding how to manage these areas can help reduce the "mental load" on your child.

1. Should My Child Do School Work at Home?

There is no "one size fits all" answer, but modern research suggests that sending work home can actually help a child return to school more easily.

- **Preventing the "Learning Gap":** If a child misses a lot of school, they may worry that they have "missed out on too much," which makes going back feel even scarier.
- **Maintaining Connection:** Completing some schoolwork at home helps your child feel they still "belong" to their class and are still a member of Denby Free.
- **Case-by-Case Basis:** Work should only be sent home if your child is emotionally well enough to do it. It should be a short-term arrangement, not a permanent solution.
- **Feedback is Key:** It is important that the school provides feedback on any work your child completes so they feel their effort is valued.

2. Managing "Micro-Transitions" Throughout the Day

We often focus on "big" transitions, like moving to a new school. However, a school day is full of "micro-transitions" that can cause high anxiety for a child experiencing EBSA:

- **The Morning Transition:** Moving from the safety of home to the school gate.
- **Environmental Changes:** Moving between different classrooms, or going from a quiet lesson to a noisy playground.
- **Staff Changes:** Moving from a teacher they know well to a different member of staff for another subject.

3. Practical Strategies for Transitions

You can work with the school to put these "scaffolding" strategies in place to make these transitions feel safer:

- **Visual Timetables:** These show exactly what is happening and in what order, reducing the "surprise" of a transition.
- **Transitional Objects:** A small item from home (like a keyring or a smooth stone) that stays with the child to provide a sense of security during the day.
- **Social Stories:** Short, simple stories that explain what will happen during a transition, helping the child know what to expect.
- **The "Soft Entry":** Allowing your child to enter school five minutes before or after other children to avoid the noise and crowds of the main entrance.
- **A "Safe Space":** Ensuring your child knows exactly where they can go if a transition feels too difficult, such as a designated quiet room or the library.

4. Supporting Neurodiverse Transitions

For a girl awaiting an autism diagnosis, these transitions are often more physically and mentally exhausting.

- **Advance Warning:** Use "check-in" times to verbally and visually prepare them for an upcoming change.
- **Predictability:** The more predictable the school day is, the less "emergency energy" she has to use to cope with changes.
- **Sensory Breaks:** Allow her to have a scheduled sensory break *before* a major transition (like lunchtime) to help her "reset" her sensory system.



Understanding the "Pull" Factors: What are the Risks?

Just as there are resilience factors that "push" a child towards school, there are "risk factors"—often called **"Pull" factors**—that pull a child away from the school environment. It is important to remember that EBSA is rarely caused by just one thing; it is usually a combination of several interlinked factors across school, home, and the child's own profile.

1. Factors at School

These are the things within the school day that can make a child feel unsafe or overwhelmed:

- **Social Challenges:** Experiencing bullying or having difficult relationships with specific peers or members of staff.
- **Learning Pressures:** Struggling with specific subjects, feeling the weight of academic demands, or being worried about exams.
- **Unmet Needs:** If a child's Special Educational Needs (SEN) are not yet identified or are not being fully met by the current provision.
- **The Environment:** Practical things like a difficult journey to school, or environmental factors such as high noise levels and crowded corridors.

2. Factors at Home

Sometimes, things happening at home can make it feel much harder for a child to leave and attend school:

- **Family Changes:** Significant shifts in family life, such as a separation, divorce, or a change in the family dynamic.
- **Stress and Health:** High levels of stress within the home, or if a parent is struggling with their own physical or mental health needs.
- **Loss:** Dealing with bereavement or the loss of a significant person or pet.
- **Worrying About You:** A child may feel they need to stay home because they are worried about what is happening there while they are away.

3. Factors Within the Child

Every child has a unique emotional and physical profile that affects how they view school:

- **Neurodiversity:** Differences such as autism or other social communication challenges can make the "hidden rules" of school much harder to navigate.
- **Sensory Processing:** For many children, sensory differences mean that the lights, smells, and sounds of school can lead to an "anxiety overflow".
- **Self-Confidence:** Low self-esteem or a lack of confidence in their own ability to cope with the school day.
- **Health:** Underlying physical illnesses or a history of traumatic events.

A "No-Blame" Approach

Identifying these risk factors is not about finding someone to blame—whether that is the school, the child, or you as a parent. Instead, it is about being **curious**. By looking at all these factors holistically, you and the school can work together to create a plan that addresses the specific "pulls" your child is experiencing, helping to make school feel like a safer, more manageable place once again.



Working Together: Our Support Plan

An action plan isn’t a contract to force a child back into school; it is a "roadmap" designed to make school feel like a safe place again. For a child awaiting an autism diagnosis, this plan provides the **predictability** they need to lower their anxiety.

The most successful plans are "co-produced," meaning you, the school, and your child all have a say in what goes into it.

1. Setting the Scene for Success

Before the plan starts, a few key things should be in place:

- **The Key Adult:** Who is the one person your child feels most comfortable with? This person should be the primary point of contact for both you and your child.
- **The Safe Space:** Where can your child go if they feel a "sensory overload" or a panic attack coming on? This should be a non-punitive, quiet area.
- **The "No-Pressure" Start:** Often, the goal of the first week isn't full lessons—it might just be getting to the school gate or spending an hour in the library.

2. The Support Plan Template

You can use these headings to start a conversation with your child's school:

Section	Details & Agreed Actions
The Key Adult	Who will meet the child? Where will they meet?
The Morning Transition	What time is the 'soft entry'? Which door will be used?
Sensory Adjustments	Use of ear defenders, uniform changes, or quiet zones.
The 'Safe Space'	Where is it, and how does the child ask to go there?
Work Expectations	Will they be in full lessons or doing 'nurture' activities?
Communication	How will school update you? (e.g., a daily email or home-school book).
Review Date	When will we meet again to see how it’s going? (e.g., in 2 weeks).

3. Small Steps (Graduated Return)

Think of the return to school as a ladder. You cannot jump to the top rung immediately.

- **Rung 1:** A home visit from the Key Adult or a video call.
- **Rung 2:** A "drive-by" or walking to the school gate after hours.
- **Rung 3:** Visiting the school for 20 minutes when it is empty (e.g., after 3:30 pm).
- **Rung 4:** Attending for one favourite activity or lesson.
- **Rung 5:** A personalised part-time timetable.

4. What to do when it "fails"

There will be days when the plan doesn't work and your child cannot make it in. **This is not a failure.**

- **Stay Calm:** If they can't make it, don't see it as "starting from zero." It's just a "blip" in the cycle.
- **Reduce Guilt:** Ensure your child knows you aren't cross with them. Use "we" language: "We had a tough morning, let's try our soft-entry plan again tomorrow."
- **Communicate:** Let the Key Adult know as soon as possible so they can adjust things at the school end.

5. Celebrating the "Small Wins"

For a child with EBSA, getting dressed or sitting in the school car park is a huge achievement. Celebrate the **effort** they are putting in to manage their anxiety, rather than just the end result of "being in class." This builds the resilience they need to keep trying.