

EBSNA

Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance

Understanding, Supporting and Working Together

Outside the Box Education & Consultancy • outsidetheboxeducation.org



Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA) describes a pattern of school absence that is driven by emotional and psychological distress rather than by deliberate choice, defiance or parenting failure. The child is not "refusing" school — they are unable to attend because of the level of anxiety, distress or overwhelm they experience in connection with school. This distinction matters enormously for how we respond.

WHAT IS EBSNA?

EBSNA is an umbrella term that covers a range of presentations previously described as **school refusal**, school avoidance, emotionally-based school refusal (EBSR) or persistent absenteeism. The shift in language is intentional — the word 'refusal' implies a choice, which misrepresents what is happening for most children.

EBSNA exists on a spectrum. It may present as occasional reluctance, regular late starts, or complete inability to leave the house. What links all presentations is that the child's distress is genuine, significant, and not within their immediate control.

EBSNA is NOT...

Truancy or deliberate avoidance. Laziness or poor motivation. A parenting problem. Something the child can simply "push through". Attention-seeking behaviour. A choice.

EBSNA IS...

A real and significant emotional response. Often linked to anxiety, trauma or neurodevelopmental difference. A signal that something needs to change. A child in distress who needs support — not pressure.

WHAT CAUSES EBSNA?

EBSNA rarely has a single cause. It typically develops from a combination of factors across the child, their family and the school environment. Understanding the contributing factors is the starting point for effective support.

Child Factors

- Anxiety disorders — generalised anxiety, social anxiety, separation anxiety or panic disorder
- Neurodevelopmental conditions including autism, ADHD and PDA (Pathological Demand Avoidance)
- Trauma history — adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), bereavement, family breakdown
- Sensory sensitivities — difficulty tolerating the noise, light, crowds or unpredictability of school
- Depression, low mood or low self-esteem
- Experiences of bullying, social rejection or peer relationship difficulties
- Perfectionism and fear of failure or embarrassment
- Physical health conditions, including medically unexplained symptoms (e.g. stomach aches, headaches on school days)

School Environment Factors

- Transitions — particularly starting school, moving year group, changing school or returning after illness

- Academic pressure, particularly around tests, assessments or public performance
- Classroom environment — noise, crowding, unpredictable routines or lack of safe adults
- Difficulties with specific teachers or staff relationships
- Feeling unseen, unsupported or misunderstood by the school
- Unmet SEND needs or a lack of reasonable adjustments

Family and Home Factors

- Parental anxiety — children are highly attuned to parental stress and worry
- Significant family events — divorce, bereavement, domestic difficulties, illness
- Enmeshment or attachment difficulties that make separation feel unsafe
- Previous negative experiences of school within the family

WHAT EBSNA LOOKS LIKE

EBSNA can present very differently across children. Some children show clear and distressing symptoms of anxiety; others may appear calm at home but become dysregulated when it is time to leave. Presentations often change over time and may escalate if unaddressed.

Sunday evening dread and distress	Anticipatory anxiety building as the school week approaches
Physical symptoms	Stomach aches, headaches, nausea, vomiting or fatigue — genuine physical responses to anxiety, not fabrication
Morning meltdowns or shutdowns	Escalating distress at the point of leaving the house — may include crying, shouting, freezing or physical resistance
Partial attendance	Arriving late, leaving early, or only attending on certain days or for certain lessons
School-based distress	Panic attacks, frequent visits to the school office, hiding, running away or requests to go home
Masking at school, melting down at home	Some children hold themselves together in school but release significant distress at home — this is still EBSNA
Complete non-attendance	Where distress has reached a point where the child cannot leave the house at all

“School non-attendance rooted in emotional distress is not a behaviour to manage — it is a signal to understand.”

— Outside the Box Education & Consultancy

STRATEGIES FOR SCHOOLS

The most important shift schools can make is from a behavioural response (consequences for absence) to a relational, needs-led response (understanding the distress and reducing barriers). Attendance cannot be the first goal — reducing anxiety must come first.

Relationship and Communication



Identify a key adult

Every child experiencing EBSNA needs at least one trusted, consistent adult in school. This person should greet them on arrival, check in regularly and be a genuine safe base — not just an admin contact.



Communicate without pressure

Keep communication warm, low-demand and non-threatening. Avoid emphasising consequences of absence. Frame messages around the child's wellbeing: 'We miss you and we want to help.' Regular, brief, positive contact with the family is more effective than formal letters.



Listen to the child

Ask the child directly what feels hard. Use open, curious questions rather than problem-solving immediately. Children often have specific, concrete concerns that can be addressed — but only if adults listen without dismissing.

Practical Adjustments



Flexible start times

A later or quieter arrival can significantly reduce morning distress. Even arriving 15 minutes after everyone else is settled can make the difference between attending and not attending.



A soft landing

Have a plan for where the child goes when they arrive — not the chaos of the playground or the classroom door. A quiet space, the key adult's room or a brief 1:1 check-in before joining the class can ease the transition enormously.



Reduce unpredictability

Many children with EBSNA are dysregulated by transitions and surprises. Provide timetables, warn about changes in advance, avoid last-minute changes to staffing or rooms, and build predictability into the day wherever possible.



A safe space

Identify a quiet, low-demand space the child can access when overwhelmed. This is not a punishment — it is a regulated environment that allows the child to return to a calm enough state to re-engage.



Partial timetables

A phased return or reduced timetable is almost always more effective than expecting full immediate attendance after a period of absence. Build gradually, starting with the activities the child feels safest with.

Working with Families



Never blame the family

Families of children with EBSNA are often already exhausted, frightened and isolated. Blame — even implied — closes down communication. Approach parents as partners facing a shared problem, not as part of the problem.



Regular, human contact

A brief, warm phone call or text from the school is worth more than a formal letter. Ask how the family are managing, not just whether the child will be in tomorrow. Parents need to feel supported too.



Joint planning

Involve parents in any reintegration or support plan. They have crucial information about what helps and what doesn't. Plans imposed without parental input rarely succeed.

What Schools Should Avoid

Persistent pressure and ultimatums

Escalating threats about attendance create more anxiety and make return harder. Pressure does not reduce distress — it increases it.

Treating absence as defiance

Responding to EBSNA as though it is a deliberate behavioural choice leads to punitive responses that are both ineffective and harmful.

Ignoring physical symptoms

Stomach aches and headaches are real physiological responses to anxiety. Dismissing them damages trust and misses the signal.

Going straight to legal action

Fines and attendance notices rarely resolve EBSNA and can severely damage the school-family relationship at a critical time.

Delayed referral

The longer EBSNA continues unaddressed, the harder it becomes to resolve. Early, collaborative intervention gives the best outcomes.

STRATEGIES FOR PARENTS AND CARERS

If your child is experiencing EBSNA, you are not failing as a parent. This is one of the most exhausting and frightening situations a family can face. The strategies below are intended to help — but please also seek support for yourself. You cannot pour from an empty cup.

Understanding What's Happening



Believe the distress is real

Your child's anxiety is not manipulation. The physical symptoms are genuine. The distress at the door is real. Accepting this — even when it's hard — is the foundation of being able to help.



Look for the underlying need

Try to understand what specifically feels unbearable about school. Is it a particular lesson, person, transition or social situation? Specifics are much easier to address than general anxiety about 'school'.



Notice patterns

Keep a simple log of what the child says, how they present on different days, and what seems to help or make things worse. This information is valuable for school, CAMHS and other professionals.

At Home



Maintain routine and structure

Even on days when your child is not in school, a gentle structure at home helps to regulate the nervous system and avoids the pattern of school days becoming unstructured rest days (which makes return harder).

Stay regulated yourself



Your child's nervous system mirrors yours. If you are visibly anxious about the situation, it amplifies their own anxiety. This is not a criticism — it is incredibly hard to stay calm. But calm, warm and matter-of-fact is the most helpful stance.

Avoid extended emotional processing in the morning



Long conversations about feelings at the point of going to school increase anxiety. Keep mornings calm and routine, and save deeper conversations for quieter times of day.

Avoid reinforcing avoidance unintentionally



If staying home becomes noticeably more comfortable, enjoyable or stimulating than the effort of going to school, avoidance is reinforced. This doesn't mean punishing the child — it means keeping home days low-key and maintaining gentle expectations.

Working with School

Ask for a meeting — not a letter



Request a face-to-face conversation with the school SENCo or pastoral lead. Letters about unauthorised absence are not the right starting point. A collaborative conversation is.

Ask about a support plan



Schools can put a specific plan in place covering: a named key adult, a soft landing on arrival, a safe space, a phased timetable and agreed communication. Ask for this to be formalised.

Seek external support



Your GP can refer to CAMHS or other services. Your local authority may have an EBSNA specialist team. Educational psychology, school counsellors, and specialist providers like OTB can all offer support alongside school.

The goal is not attendance. The goal is a child who feels safe enough to learn.

When we get that right — when schools, families and professionals work together with the child at the centre — attendance usually follows. But it cannot be the first measure of success.

Outside the Box Education & Consultancy

Holistic education & consultancy, Cornwall

07766 168788

[outsidetheboxeducation.org](https://www.outsidetheboxeducation.org)

Key references: Kearney & Silverman (1990) • EWO & CAMHS best practice guidance • DfE (2023)