EBSA and Tackling Social Isolation

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Free handout from today's session

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Webinar Outcomes

- **Spot the early signs**: recognise signs of school distress and explain how anxiety, isolation and absence can reinforce each other.
- **Understand what is getting in the way**: use what the pupil and family tell you to identify barriers to attendance and belonging.
- **Plan a supported return:** choose an adjustment staff can put in place and agree how to review it with the pupil and family.



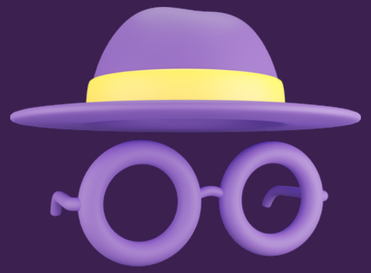
Chat box



Reflection



Practical Strategy



One pupil throughout the session

Choose a pupil from your own setting. Keep their identity private.

Understand what makes attending or joining in difficult
Notice early changes and listen to the pupil's experience
Choose an adjustment and build a plan with the family

By the end: one action you can take this week



If a flower doesn’t bloom, we change the environment, not the flower.



What Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) is...

- Formerly referred to as ‘school **refusal**’.
- A term used in the UK to describe children and young people who experience severe difficulty attending school due to **emotional distress, anxiety, or physical symptoms.**
- Widely recognised as a **Special Educational Need and Disability**
- LAs have a l**egal duty** to arrange suitable alternative education if they cannot attend school.
- Schools must make **reasonable adjustments**.
- Doesn’t require a formal neurodevelopmental or medical diagnosis to receive EBSA support (DfE).

What Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) is NOT...

Not ‘truancy’.

Not deliberate or wilful act of defiance.

Not just prevalent in neurodivergent children - any child can experience EBSA (but there are high prevalent rates among ND children).

A major UK study (2023) found 92.1% of children experiencing severe school-based distress were ND, with 83.4% being autistic.

Meet Steph

What does ‘refusal’ suggest about Steph?

Refusal

What does this word mean?
What does it suggest?
What does it imply?

Pop it in the chat.



Meet Steph... she's been called a 'school refuser'...

What does 'school refusal' suggest about Steph?

Refusal

Deliberate choice
Wilful act to disobey
Defiance
Won't go...
Stubbornness
Parents are also judged



What pupils may hear about their absence

[redacted] Sounds like she just wants to stay home.

[redacted] Traumatised .....yeah right

[redacted] sks her what traumatised means... she won't be able to answer. Shes heard it and repeated it

[redacted] Why's she traumatised? Does she not like having rules?

[redacted] What is your responsibility for her trauma?

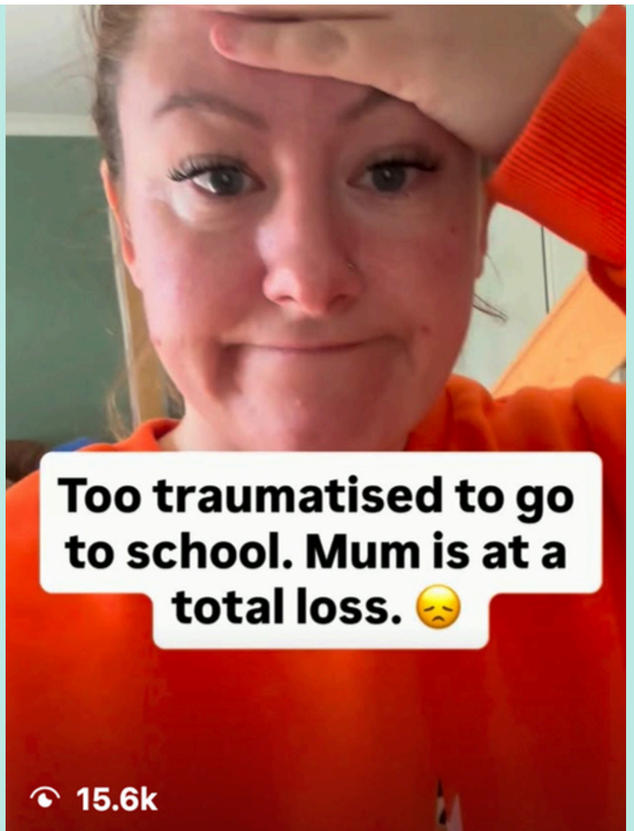
[redacted] And you're just going to give in to her playing you like a 2 bob fiddle. Get to school ... end of

[redacted] It all comes from you .... The parent

[redacted] Soft parenting ... or lack of male discipline .

[redacted] Give her a clip and send her on her way

[redacted] You've clearly failed her, why is she 'traumatised'?



Meet Steph

What does ‘school avoidance’ suggest about Steph?

Avoidance

What does this word mean?
What does it suggest?
What does it imply?

Pop it in the chat.



Meet Steph

How does each word change how adults view Steph?

Avoidance

Stress response (nervous system)
Protecting themselves
Protective instinct
Can’t go
Unmet needs
Safety
Reduces parent blame



Social isolation and loneliness

Ask curious questions, don't make assumptions.

Social isolation

- Limited access to meaningful contact or participation
- May follow exclusion, inaccessible activities or absence

Loneliness

- Feeling a gap between the connection wanted and the connection experienced
- Can occur in a busy classroom or among friends

The catch-22: anxiety, isolation and attendance

Anxiety builds
Something about school feels hard to face.

Less time in school
Being away may bring some immediate relief.

Connection can fade
Fewer everyday moments with peers and staff.

Return feels harder
Worries about fitting in or catching up may grow.

A PUPIL MIGHT THINK

"I miss my friends. I don't know how to go back."



Chat: What could school change to ease one part of this cycle for the pupil you're thinking about?



Understanding the drivers of EBSA

- **School demands:** sensory load, uncertainty or difficult transitions
- **Learning**: inaccessible work, fear of mistakes or unmet support needs
- **Relationships**: bullying, rejection or difficulty finding a place
- **Health and home:** illness, loss, caring responsibilities or separation worries
- **Practical access:** transport, routines or financial barriers

Observation and interpretation



Think about the pupil you chose earlier. Which moment in their day do you know least about? Jot down one question you could ask them or their family about that moment.

Early warning signs

Attendance and participation

- New lateness or requests to leave
- Avoiding particular lessons, breaks or transitions
- Withdrawing from friends or activities

Distress and recovery

- Repeated worries before school
- Headaches, stomach aches or sleep changes
- Exhaustion, shutdown or distress after the day

Patterns are prompts for enquiry. They do not confirm a diagnosis.

When distress is less visible

A pupil may appear settled while using considerable effort to get through the day.

- Masking can conceal communication, sensory or emotional difficulties
- School and home may see different parts of the same experience
- Listening to both accounts helps us understand the cost of attending



What does your pupil's school day cost them afterwards?



The pupil’s view of the day

For your pupil, which question could open a useful conversation?

“Which part of the day feels hardest?”
“When do you feel most comfortable here?”
“Who could help and how would you like them to do it?”

Chat: choose a question or suggest your own



Belonging has a school context

UK research published in 2025 analysed 14,157 pupils aged 15 in 550 schools.

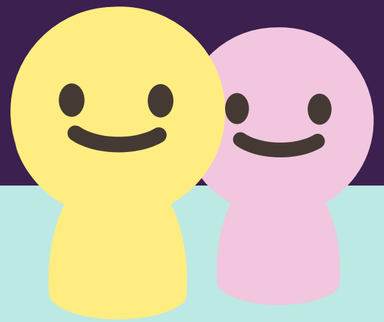
- Availability of extracurricular activities and class size were associated with belonging
- The school environment contributes to the picture alongside individual factors
- For practice: check whether a pupil can actually access the activities and relationships available

Small adjustments across the school day

Pressure point	A practical school response
Arrival	A familiar welcome with a named adult and a back-up
Transitions	A clear preview, calmer route or supported handover
Learning	Accessible instructions and a manageable starting task
Seeking help	An agreed signal and a place the pupil can use safely

Choose the adjustment with the pupil. Check that every relevant adult knows it.

Access to peer connection



- An invitation to a small activity linked to a genuine interest
- A supported partner or group choice, with the pupil's agreement
- An accessible lunch or break option with a familiar adult nearby
- A discreet check-in on exclusion, bullying and online worries

A quiet space should offer a route into connection when the pupil wants it.

Working with families



“We want to understand the whole day, including what happens before and afterwards.”

- Invite the family’s account and ask what already helps
- Agree one contact person and an achievable communication routine
- Name the school adjustment, the responsible adult and the review date
- Consider the pressure on work, transport and other children

A difference in accounts is useful information to explore together.

Language that opens a conversation

How could you make this response more useful?



"They seem fine once they are here."

- Acknowledge what school has observed
- Invite the family's account of the whole day
- Agree one thing to explore or change together

Chat: write one sentence you could use



A plan for emerging difficulties



- Record the pattern and hear the pupil and family's views
- Choose one barrier that school can reduce now
- Agree the adjustment, the adult responsible and a back-up
- Review within a school week and adapt the support



For your pupil: what can change before more absence develops?



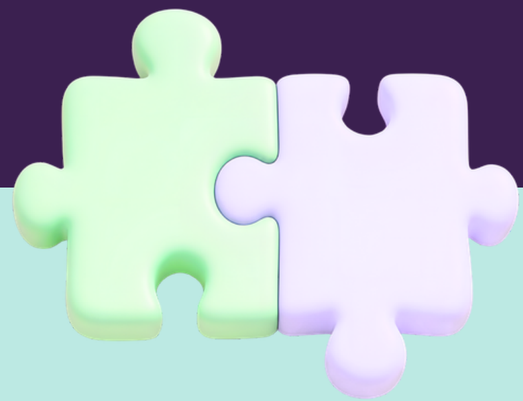
Connection during absence



- Agree predictable contact with a trusted adult
- Offer low-pressure contact with peers when welcome and safe
- Keep learning accessible, with priorities agreed for the pupil’s capacity
- Explain what will happen next so the pupil stays part of school life

Contact should be a source of support the pupil can use.

The foundations of reintegration



A return plan needs to address what made attendance difficult.

- Resolve safety concerns and act on bullying or exclusion
- Put learning, sensory and communication adjustments in place
- Agree the pupil's trusted adult, safe space and route to help
- Plan with the pupil and family, including education during any absence

What will be different when this pupil returns?



An example of a supported return*

Possible step	School provides	What to review
A short visit to a familiar space	Known adult, calm arrival and agreed finish	How manageable did it feel?
A supported learning activity	Chosen starting task and a reliable route to help	Did the adjustments work?
A supported lesson or social activity	Predictable expectations and safe peer contact	Is the pupil ready to repeat or extend?

***Illustrative steps only. The pupil's needs shape the sequence and pace.**



What teachers can do in the first lessons back

The first lessons back after a long absence - what every teacher can do:

- Check the agreed welcome, adjustments and way to ask for help before the lesson.
- Show the pupil where to start. Keep any conversation about their absence private.
- Give them an accessible first task that connects to what the class is learning.

Primary

Have a familiar adult help the pupil into a routine they already know.

Offer a choice about how to join in.

Secondary

Use the agreed help signal in every subject.

Recap the key bit of missed learning the pupil needs for today's lesson (if appropriate).



Progression with review



- Choose a manageable starting point together
- Review the experience and the support delivered
- Repeat, adapt or extend the next step



Reflect: which part of this process does your pupil need most?





A plan for difficult days



- The pupil knows who will help and where they can go
- Staff know the agreed response and who covers absences
- The family knows how school will communicate
- A missed step triggers a review of the barrier and support

Recovery information helps us decide what happens next.

A plan for difficult days - teaching staff



Respond

Follow the agreed signal. Know who will help, who covers if they're away and how the pupil can rejoin.

Share

Tell the named lead where things got difficult, which adjustments were in place and what helped.

Review

Ask the pupil how it felt and the family how they were afterwards. Decide together whether to repeat, adapt or extend the next step.



Temporary part-time timetables



England guidance: exceptional, temporary arrangements within a wider support plan.

- School and parent agree the arrangement
- The plan includes regular reviews and a proposed end date
- School keeps education, safeguarding and correct recording under review
- A reduced timetable cannot serve as a behaviour-management measure

The aim remains suitable full-time education.

What progress should we review?

Access to education

- Attendance and lesson participation
- Learning the pupil can engage with
- Support delivered consistently

Experience of school

- Feeling safer and more connected
- Using help when needed
- Distress and recovery becoming more manageable

Ask the pupil and family what has changed, alongside the attendance record.



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One action this week



Complete this privately for the pupil you chose

The barrier I need to understand better is…
The adjustment school can try is…
The person I will involve and the review date are…

Chat: share the action, without identifying the pupil

Thank You
Questions?

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