Emotionally Based School Refusal
A guide for primary and secondary schools
Emotionally Based School Refusal

This guide has been written by Dawn Hull and Dr Jo Clarke of the Derbyshire Educational Psychology Service to provide information and guidance to primary and secondary school staff around the issue of Emotional Based School Refusal (EBSR). It has been developed in conjunction with a working group of interested professionals from a variety of agencies, including teaching and pastoral staff from a number of secondary schools in the Peak 11 cluster. The purpose of the project was to:

- provide clear and concise information to school staff and agencies about EBSR
- share and celebrate the good practice that already exists in relation to EBSR
- support schools in managing pupils at risk of EBSR
- clarify the roles of different agencies in relation to EBSR.

Initially information was sought, via questionnaire, from a number of secondary schools within the High Peak area and beyond, regarding their understanding of EBSR and current practice. The response indicated a mixed picture in terms of a shared definition and understanding about EBSR and levels of reported confidence in responding systematically to difficulties.

Colleagues from a range of agencies and secondary schools then came together in a working group to discuss EBSR. The subsequent discussions form the basis of this guide with vignettes from the schools involved interspersed throughout. The guide also draws heavily on existing literature which is referenced throughout and in full in Section Nine.

This guidance was produced in collaboration with the following working group members:

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- Dr Jo Clarke, Educational Psychology Service
- Linda Dalton, Pastoral Manager, Highfields Secondary School
- Helen Horrod, Pastoral Manager, Lady Manners Secondary School
- Mike Houlton, Education Welfare Officer, Multi Agency Team
- Dawn Hull, Educational Psychology Service
- Mary McNaulty, Pastoral Manager, St Thomas More Secondary School
- Dave Wallace, Principal Educational Welfare Officer

We would also like to thank the other professionals that attended the initial meeting and the agencies that have contributed to Section Seven of the guide.
Section One

The National picture and non-attendance

National data indicates that attendance has been improving, but that there were still 57 million days of school missed in 2009/2010. Advice on school attendance published by the Department for Education (DfE) in 2012 and revised in March 2013, highlights that regular attendance at school is central to raising standards and ensuring that pupils fulfil their potential.

Being physically present in school with access to the learning environment and curriculum is a prerequisite to learning for the majority of children and young people. The DfE guidance reports that children with poor attendance tend to achieve less at both primary and secondary school. The evidence shows that children with poor attendance are less likely to succeed academically and that they are more likely to be not in education, employment or training (NEET) when they leave school.

Sustained patterns of non-attendance over a period of time can also impact on an individual’s opportunity for social interaction with peers, their self-esteem and mental health.

The Government expects schools and local authorities to:

- promote good attendance and reduce absence
- ensure every pupil has access to full-time education
- act early to address patterns of absence.

There are a variety of reasons why pupils do not attend school, or attend school with difficulty, which are important in terms of distinguishing between EBSR and other forms of non-attendance.

A range of definitions and terminology continues to be used by professionals and schools to describe non-attendance, including: school phobia, truancy, school avoidance and school refusal.

Research carried out by Archer et al. School Phobia and School Refusal: Research into Causes and Remedies (2003) found that less than half of the schools surveyed across England distinguished between ‘wilful’ non-attenders and those with ‘school phobia’.

Many of these definitions, such as school phobia, are historical but can cause misunderstanding in terms of locating the problem solely within the context of the school. School phobia suggests that there is something about the school that the child or young person is afraid of. In reality the situation is usually more complex than this.
and any assessment or intervention needs to take into account factors at the level of the child, family and school.

School non-attendance is a broad term to describe an individual’s behaviour, it tells us very little about the reason for a pupil’s absence. Within this group there will be pupils who are truanting from school, who are absent with the permission of their parents and those for whom the prospect of attending school is extremely anxiety provoking.

In terms of improving attendance schools across Derbyshire already employ a range of measures including: adherence to national policies and guidance, a named person in school to monitor attendance, and clear systems to work with parents and carers around this issue.

**Vignette one**

**School A**

An attendance information leaflet is issued to parents before admission and during a student’s time at school, to remind them of the school attendance policy, their responsibility regarding attendance and who to contact if there are any concerns.

Letters are sent on a regular basis to update parents on attendance, to highlight concerns and recognise improvement and excellence.
Section Two

Emotionally Based School Refusal (EBSR)

The purpose of this guide is to provide information around the issue of EBSR. This term is used to describe a small group of pupils who do not attend school for underlying emotional reasons. The following definition of EBSR was agreed by the working group members:

‘…characterised by internalised problems such as fear and anxiety, misery, complaints of feeling ill without obvious cause, reluctance to leave home, or externalised problems including tantrums and oppositional behaviour.’ (West Sussex EPS, 2004, p5).

A clear distinction is usually drawn between those pupils that are seen to be truanting and those whose non-attendance has an emotional basis. Though research conducted by Malcolm et. al (2003) which explored the causes of absence ‘truancy’ with young people found a potential overlap with EBSR in terms of school-based reasons for non-attendance. These included:

- problems with specific lessons or teachers
- complexity of secondary school
- being bullied and social isolation.

However, two fundamental components of EBSR are:

1. a pattern of absence from school which may, over time, result in a prolonged period of non-attendance

2. anxiety or fear which presents as reluctance or refusal to go into school or in some cases to remain in school.

EBSR differs from truancy or ‘wilful’ non-attendance in a number of ways: e.g. the underlying presence of anxiety or emotional upset, and the absence of significant antisocial behaviour. Pupils experiencing EBSR tend to stay at home when absent from school and parents are usually aware of this.

Sometimes it will be obvious from a young person’s presentation and chronic non-attendance that they are experiencing significant difficulties. However, there will other pupils experiencing anxiety around going to school who may be harder for school staff to identify. These young people may have sporadic non-attendance or a pattern of absence corresponding to a particular lesson or day. When these children are in school they may complain about feeling unwell or make frequent requests to leave the classroom.
To help describe the pattern and severity of school refusal, Thambirajah et. al (2008) refer to a spectrum of school refusal behaviour from occasional to persistent absence, as shown below.

| In school with heightened anxiety and occasional absence, parents may report some reluctance to attend | Increased sporadic absence or noted pattern, parents may report reluctance to attend | Non-attendance over prolonged period with extreme reluctance to attend school |

**Prevalence**

Primary and secondary schools are required to complete an attendance register using national codes. This enables information to be recorded in a consistent way. As part of this pupils may be classified as present in school or absent. This may be an authorised absence, i.e. illness, or an unauthorised absence.

Variations in the identification and coding of EBSR, means that the national incidence of EBSR is not accurately known. Schools may attempt to keep a separate record, though they are not required to do so. Some pupils may be classed as having authorised absences due to medical difficulties and the emotional element of anxiety may only be recognised after prolonged or repeated absence. Thambirajah (2008) notes that this group remains ‘largely invisible’ in terms of official statistics.

Prevalence rates for EBSR are generally estimated to be between one and two per cent of all school aged children although other researchers have suggested it may be as high as five per cent. Researchers have not found a significant difference for rates of EBSR in relation to gender.

Questionnaire responses from secondary schools in the High Peak area indicate a wide variation in the number of young people identified with EBSR over the academic year 2011-2012. Responses from individual schools ranged from two to seventeen pupils. Variation in reported levels could in part be due to inconsistent methods of defining, identifying and recording EBSR.
**Presentation**

EBSR is not in itself a mental health disorder, rather it is a combination of symptoms that indicates that a young person is experiencing emotional distress relating to school attendance. This typically includes high levels of anxiety.

Pupils may exhibit one or more of the following associated behaviours:

- crying
- pleading
- refusal to get ready for school or to leave the house
- rumination and worry around school-related issues
- sleep problems
- psychosomatic illness

Psychosomatic illnesses, including headache and tummy ache, occur when no underlying medical cause can be found and the basis is thought to be emotional.

Thambirajah (2008) explains that the child or young person may also display defensive aggression as a means of trying to control a situation that feels ‘out-of-control’. Typically this might be directed towards a parent or carer who is encouraging the child to go into school and may include verbal abuse or physical aggression directed at objects or people.

These behaviours can be seen as symptoms of anxiety and an attempt by the child or young person to avoid a situation that they perceive to be threatening.

There is an acknowledgement that just as the combination of factors contributing to EBSR are complex and largely unique to the individual and their family, symptoms and associated behaviours can also present in a variety of ways.

Practitioners need to be aware that some pupils with EBSR appear to function well when they are in school. Likewise, they may happily socialise with friends outside school or attend specific clubs or activities. This can lead school staff and others to question whether a pupil is actually experiencing EBSR and, in turn, can lead to potential misunderstanding with parents who are experiencing significant problems at the beginning or end of the school day.
Section Three

Contributing factors: things to consider

A range of predisposing or risk factors can be identified in terms of increased vulnerability to EBSR.

However, research shows that it is typically the result of a combination of predisposing factors at the level of the child, family and school interacting with a particular trigger.

Possible triggers include: transition between primary and secondary education, loss or bereavement within the family, a change in friendship groups or bullying. Some pupils may find it harder to return to school following a prolonged absence, for instance due to illness or a school holiday.

It should be noted that there is still little agreement amongst researchers regarding predisposing factors. Historically, within child or family based factors tended to be emphasised, with the literature making reference to anxiety disorders, including: separation or social anxiety. However, the importance of school based factors both in terms of risk and resilience, are increasingly becoming the focus of research in this area.

A number of small scale studies with young people experiencing EBSR and their parents have been carried out with the aim of identifying causal factors. One such study by trainee Educational Psychologists Purcell and Tsverik (2008) sought to explore the views of children and young people experiencing EBSR using unstructured interviews. Several of the themes identified are discussed below.

The pupil’s school experience was identified as a key theme. The young people discussed a range of issues, which included: fear of certain teachers, social isolation, experiences of bullying, social difficulties (which affected the ability to build positive social relationships); and some expressed disaffection with education. A number of the young people reported that a lack of discipline in their school made it difficult to attend. Additionally pupils who had attended lots of different schools from a young age suggested that this caused them difficulties.

The young people often reported that their views were not sought in relation to the reasons for their school refusal; “No-one asked my opinion, I would have liked to have gone to school but I couldn’t”. (Purcell and Tsverik, 2008 p.21)
A study by Toplis (2004) explored parents’ views of the causal and maintaining factors of EBSR. Parents reported a number of factors that they felt had contributed to school refusal for their child. Although this was only a small study consisting of eight parents a number of commonalities between cases were reported, including:

- verbal and physical bullying by peers
- feelings of isolation, anxiety or depression
- problems with academic work
- difficulties experienced after a school transition
- difficulties experienced after a distressing family event.

As always the exact combination of vulnerabilities will be unique to the individual and therefore requires careful assessment. The following factors may be a useful starting point for school staff in thinking about a pupil’s needs:

**Child factors:**
- difficulties with social interaction
- undiagnosed needs that make it hard to access the learning environment and curriculum
- feeling overwhelmed by academic or social demands
- medical difficulties
- temperament - some children may have a predisposition to developing problems relating to anxiety

**Family factors:**
- family events such as: divorce or separation, loss or bereavement
- the mental and physical wellbeing of parents
- the young person taking on the additional role of young carer for siblings or parent

**School factors:**
- size of the school
- bullying, including cyber bullying
- transition to secondary school and associated adjustment in terms of expectations and staff
- poor special educational needs or pastoral provision

Toplis’ research suggests that while EBSR can occur at any age throughout an individual’s educational career it tends to peak at times of transition. On entry to school (5-6 years) and transition to secondary school (10-11 years).
As well as being aware of the potential risk factors for EBSR it is also important to consider protective factors that can support the individual and family. School based protective factors, for instance, would include a transition policy with clear procedures for sharing information, including attendance data, on individual pupils.

Vignette two

School C

The Head of Year 7, Head of Lower School and the Head teacher visit primary schools in Year 6 so that students, parents and carers can become familiar with staff. To prepare for the transitions, visits are made by Year 6 students to our lower school during the summer term.

In addition because we are a split site school, Year 8 students who will need support on transfer to the upper school site are also identified by the Head of Year and Inclusion Team. Visits are made by Year 8 students before they move to the upper school at the start of Year 9.
Section Four

The significance of transition

The experience of transfer from primary to secondary school is fraught with a variety of adjustments for children and young people. Transfer at this age is complex and incorporates three very different types of change:

- developmental
- environmental
- organisational change (Anderson et al, 2000)

These changes should not be looked at in isolation, but as interlinking factors that can affect the child or young person in different ways.

Transition has to be looked at in the context of the life of an 11 year old. Young people at this age are beginning to define who they are and their friends and family relations in a more reflexive way; often, in terms of forming their own identities. They are also becoming more sensitive to the world around them and their place in it. Transition is something that happens alongside this and functions as an extra process that children and young people must adjust to.

Transition can feel like an interruption for children and young people who have reached a settled and confident stage in their primary school life. This process is even more difficult for the more vulnerable and needy children who may already be experiencing interrupted learning. Transition, and indeed, any significant change, can affect the balance between risk and resilience. Change inevitably involves an element of loss.Whilst the change might be a positive move to something new and exciting, children will leave behind elements of what went before and will need to come to terms with this.

Most children can quickly adapt to their new environment and the opportunities offered by secondary school, though some will have experienced many instances of loss and separation and will therefore be particularly anxious about yet another change. Those who experience social exclusion, deprivation, disadvantage or a lack of support and those who have had difficult experiences in their early years are more likely to struggle.

Even children who appear to be coping well can be knocked off course by events. Developing the capacity of all children to cope, by increasing their range of strategies and skills, can be a valuable preventative strategy. Due to the timing of transition, it is imperative that schools and parents provide the right support to children to help them to adjust to this particular change so that they can progress effectively. Appropriate support at the right time is vital to ensure that children do not become vulnerable to school refusal.
A complex association exists between changes in school organisation, school environment and personal development. A more holistic approach to transition is therefore essential to reduce the sense of anxiety that some children may experience during the transition phase.

In terms of supporting the transition process schools may like to pay particular attention to the following organisational and social considerations.

Organisational considerations

- **The layout of the school** - a common anxiety amongst primary school pupils is how they will find their way around their new school without getting lost. To alleviate these anxieties and to ensure that new pupils feel prepared, they could be provided with a map of the school building including a simple key to all areas. A tour around the school could be organised whereby older pupils act as guides for new pupils. Older pupils could also be available throughout the initial term to offer help or advice to new pupils who may require additional support finding their way around the school building.

- **Information on the lunch system and canteen** - unstructured times can be a source of anxiety for some pupils. Schools could provide lunchtime buddies to help new pupils integrate with others and become used to new lunchtime routines and systems. The lunch time routine could be explained to new pupils as part of a tour of the school, or via information in a school guide.

- **Information on how lessons are structured** - new pupils can become familiar with how lessons are structured by attending ‘demo lessons’ as part of their transition visits. Older pupils may provide informal talks to new pupils about certain lessons, the usual structure of lessons and what can be expected. The chance for a ‘question and answer’ session between current and new pupils could also prove useful to prepare new pupils and alleviate any concerns or anxieties.

- **Information on advice and support systems inside and outside of school** - starting a new school can be a daunting process for any pupil, but for some pupils this transition is particularly challenging. Pupils need to feel safe, secure and supported whilst in school and in their community. It is therefore important that they are made aware of the support systems available to them both within the school setting and in the community. This information could be given prior to their transition via a school information pack. This pack might include, ‘Frequently asked questions’ and also information particular to the pupil, such as their form tutor’s name and the names of identified school buddies. Pastoral areas in school could also be highlighted on the school map and include a summary of the types of support and advice offered to pupils and the names and photographs of key staff, for example, the school nurse, school counsellor and SENCO.
It might also be of value to provide new pupils with a self-help resource that contains information about relevant outside agencies, such as the NSPCC and ‘Young Minds’. This could also be provided for pupils either as part of the information pack and/or on the school website.

- **Information on how to deal with personal belongings**—this information can be provided within a school information pack or school guide and can be reiterated to new pupils via their form tutors on transition visits.

**Social and personal considerations**

- **Opportunities for structured space and time to make new friends**—many children are concerned about being able to build new and successful friendships on transition. It is important that prior to transition and during the initial term, opportunities are built into the curriculum to help foster positive social relationships between pupils. This might be achieved through residential trips, orientations days and induction events. Once the term begins, there are a range of interventions that can support social inclusion and social relationships such as the ‘Circle of Friends’ approach and buddy systems.

- **Information on relevant policies, such as anti-bullying**—it is important that new pupils know that they are safe and secure in the environment. It is important that parents and carers also have access to this information. A school guide or school information pack could highlight key policies and these could also be detailed as downloadable documents on the school website for pupils, parents and staff to access.

- **Information on after-school clubs and activities**—Extra-curricular opportunities are an important part of school life to encourage the development of social relationships and new skills/interests. Information on clubs could be provided to new pupils via a school guide or school information pack or via form tutors. There could be a central noticeboard in school which details all of the clubs and activities available to pupils. This information could also be displayed to pupils in their form rooms.

**Practical suggestions on transition from children and young people**

Children and young people have identified a range of actions which they felt helped and supported their transition process. These include:

- more time to get to know the high school setting and the people in it, both adults and children
- school staff to acknowledge the mixture of excitement and anxiety that goes with starting a new school
- further information on common practical concerns, e.g. getting lost in school
- a mentoring or buddy scheme
Section Five

Understanding anxiety

A survey for the Office for National Statistics (2004) found that ten per cent of young people between the ages of five and fifteen years have a diagnosable mental health disorder that causes significant distress. A more specific breakdown, given in the Heads Up report (2008) suggests that four per cent of young people are affected by emotional disorders, which include anxiety.

Whilst EBSR is not, of itself, a mental health disorder, it is characterised by feelings of anxiety related to school attendance.

Anxiety can be thought of as the body’s warning signal and is a normal response to a perceived or real threat. It can be helpful in terms of preparing the body for action by releasing the hormone, adrenaline which provides energy in terms of a flight or fight response. This is crucial when we need to escape from an immediate physical threat. Likewise in some situations, such as or in an interview or exam, a moderate amount of anxiety can help an individual focus and concentrate.

However, high levels of anxiety can, over time, become harmful, particularly when it starts to interfere with an individual’s ability to cope with the stresses and strains of everyday life.

When thinking about EBSR we need to take into account the individual's:

- feelings
- thoughts and
- physical sensations.

These factors determine the child’s behaviour or response. For instance, a young person may start to worry about going to school and this may be accompanied by unhelpful thoughts and physical reactions. They may develop a headache, a pounding heart and/or nausea.

Heyne (2002) suggests that the child’s perception of his or her ability to cope with school, including the social and academic aspects is a crucial but often overlooked factor in relation to school refusal. Negative thinking or rumination can lead to further feelings of worry and if left unaddressed may undermine any reintegration attempts.
The individual may experience anxious feelings at the prospect of attending school or leaving the house. These feelings may start the evening before or even a couple of days before an anticipated return to school following a holiday or authorised absence.

Individuals experiencing a high level of anxiety often report finding it difficult to stop thinking about a particular situation, which in turn can lead to more negative thoughts and feelings of helplessness.

On the morning of school the child may be motivated by overwhelming fear and anxiety to act in a way that is designed to avoid the perceived threat – school. Successful avoidance leads to a brief respite from and a reduction in the individual’s level of anxiety. The avoidant behaviour can therefore become reinforced overtime.

This is demonstrated by the cycle of reinforcement below:

![Cycle of Reinforcement Diagram]

Generally the longer the period of absence, the harder it can be for the individual to successfully return to school. Early identification, assessment and intervention are therefore important in terms of outcome.
Section Six

Identification and assessment: the school

Schools have a key role in the prevention, early identification and continued management of EBSR. Adults within schools are ideally placed to identify attendance difficulties, to liaise with others, to carry out assessments and to coordinate a return to school plan. This is supported by Toplis’ (2004) research, which highlighted that parents believed timely support and intervention within the school context was important.

Vignette three

**School D**

The attendance officer is usually the first point of contact regarding any absence. This is either by the parent contacting the school or the attendance officer following up an unexplained absence.

Concerns are then passed to the Head of Year who will arrange a meeting in school with the parents and student. It is important that the student is involved in the discussion.

Any assessment and subsequent plan will need to take into account the views of parents and the young person. The plan has a greater chance of success when there is a high level of communication and consistency in terms of management between school and home.

Having identified concerns regarding a pupil’s attendance it may be helpful for school staff to consider the indicators listed on page 18 in order to identify whether or not the individual might be at risk of developing EBSR. This has been taken from North Somerset’s *Emotionally Based School Refusal Guidance* (2010) and is included in appendix one as a checklist of possible indicators.

It is important to note that that not all children with EBSR will display all of the indicators and as such it is important to keep in mind the two fundamental components discussed earlier in the guide:

1. a pattern of absence from school which may, over time, result in a prolonged period of non-attendance

2. anxiety or fear which presents as reluctance or refusal to go into school or in some cases to remain in school
Indicators of EBSR: what you might notice

- Difficulty attending school with periods of prolonged absence
- Child determined not to leave home and stays away from school with the knowledge of the parent/carer
- Patterns in absences, for example, particular days and/or subjects
- A history of anxiety (including EBSR) in the family
- Reluctance to attend school trips
- Frequent absences for minor illnesses
- Anxiety on separation and inappropriate dependence on family members e.g. anxiety expressed about the safety of those at home
- Evidence of under-achievement of learning potential
- Social isolation and avoidance of class mates or peer group
- Regular absence without indication of anti-social behaviours
- Challenging behaviours, particularly in relation to specific situations at school
- The young person expresses a desire to attend classes but is unable to do so
- Severe emotional upset with excessive fearfulness, outbursts of temper and complaints of feeling ill on school days
- Depression and sense of isolation resulting in, low self-esteem and lack of confidence
- Confusion or extreme absent mindedness shown in school due to lack of concentration resulting in, lower attainments
- Physical changes i.e. sweating, sickness, aching limbs, headaches, panic attacks, abdominal pain, rapid weight loss or gain
- Disruption of day-to-day activities that affect the family and put parents/carers under a great deal of pressure.
Identification and assessment: working with parents

EBSR can be a complex and multifaceted difficulty and is ideally addressed by a close and supportive partnership between school and parents. In terms of best practice schools should ensure that they have:

- a warm, welcoming ethos that promotes partnerships with parents
- systems and resources to promote the attendance of children at all ages
- clear systems for the early identification of attendance difficulties
- staff trained in the issue of EBSR, including: assessment and intervention
- written material for parents and carers around the issue of EBSR
- a clear understanding of the role of external agencies and referral routes
- established policies around issues such as: attendance, Special Educational Needs (SEN) behaviour management, bullying and transition
- a strong pastoral system and an identified senior member of staff to coordinate the response for a pupil with EBSR.

Toplis (2004) found that parents valued having an adult within school that their child could build a positive relationship with. In addition some parents felt that one key person should be involved to coordinate the return to school plan and the response of support services.

The checklist above has been included as an audit in appendix two and can be used by schools to develop good practice in this area.

In trying to establish a collaborative relationship staff should be aware that parents may find it hard to talk about the difficulties that they are experiencing in trying to get their child into school. They may be concerned that other people will blame them for their child’s absence, that a judgement will be made about their parenting capacity or that they will get into trouble in some way. This needs to be dealt with in a sensitive manner.

When difficulties with school refusal have been identified, school staff should arrange a time to speak with the pupil’s parents in order to gain further information regarding the nature, duration and severity of any attendance problems. Concerns regarding attendance should be discussed with parents as early as possible to prevent the situation becoming entrenched.
Vignette four

School A

Where a student may be struggling to attend school the initial course of action is to arrange to meet with the student and parent as soon as possible and to try to ascertain any reasons or factors which may be the cause of the situation.

In many cases where there are friendship issues, high levels of anxiety, emotional disturbance, family issues, these can be addressed immediately and the problem can be resolved quickly and effectively.

As part of an initial meeting staff may like to ask parents about:

- the child’s developmental and educational history
- reported friendship groups (both in and out of school)
- concerns about academic progress
- emergence of difficulties and any potential changes or losses within the family or child’s life
- what the child says about school and any specific fears or difficulties that they have reported
- the typical morning and evening routine
- behaviour and symptoms of anxiety
- what the child does when they are absent from school
- the impact on various family members
- other aspects of family life that are being affected
- differing views and ideas within the family regarding the problem and possible ways forward.

While it is important to talk about the problem and the child’s presentation it can be helpful to balance this with a more solution-based approach. This might include inviting parents to reflect on things that have been helpful in the past or current situation.
Staff should also ask about:

- times when their child has managed to get into school and what was different about those times
- the most helpful thing that they or someone else has done in dealing with the problem so far
- what their child reports is working well in school (friends, specific teachers or lessons)
- what has helped in the past when things have been difficult
- strategies that they have found most helpful so far in managing their child's anxiety
- support networks for the young person and family.
Identification and assessment: working with the young person

Whatever the age of the child it is important to provide them with the opportunity to express their views and ideas about the difficulties that they are experiencing and what they feel would be helpful.

The approach taken will depend on the chronological age of the child, their level of understanding and language, and their preferred method of expression. A key part of any work with a young person experiencing EBSR will be for the adult to listen and to provide an empathetic response.

Younger children can often find it difficult to put into words how they are feeling and a creative art, or play based approach, may be more helpful. For instance, drawing a picture to show how they are feeling may be less intimidating that answering lots of questions. Being invited to draw a picture of their school or classroom might be a starting point in exploring an individual’s experience of school; both positive and negative.

Older children and teenagers may be more comfortable with having a conversation about their experiences. Ideally this needs to take place with an adult that the child feels that they have a good relationship with and in whom they trust.

If the young person is not attending school then careful consideration needs to be given regarding the location where the conversation might take place.

There are a range of approaches and resources that may prove helpful in terms of eliciting the young person’s thoughts, these include:

**Multi Element Plan (MEP) cards**, these can be used flexibly to explore the young person’s perception of themselves in relation to school and to identify potentially helpful environmental factors.
**Externalisation**, this is a way of separating the problematic feeling or difficulty, for instance anxiety, from the individual. So rather than talking about an anxious individual or ‘your worrying thoughts’ which locates the problem with the individual, the difficulty is externalised. The ‘anxiety’ is viewed as separate and as such something that can be thought about and discussed. Helpful questions might include:

- ‘What name would you give to the feeling that you experience when you think about going in to school?’
- If it was a character what would it look like? What would it say?’
- ‘How does the anxiety get in the way of you attending school?’
- ‘When is the anxiety in control and when are you in charge?’

**Information, resources and training regarding MEP cards and narrative approaches can be obtained via the Educational Psychology Service (EPS) or the Behaviour Support Service.**

Resources such as **feeling thermometers or body maps**, are also frequently used to support pupils in understanding how anxiety works, to map the physical symptoms the individual may be experiencing and to obtain a measure of how the person is feeling in different situations

**Individual conversation**, this approach may work particularly well with older children and teenagers. The adult may like to enquire about school factors including:

- timetabling and worries about specific lessons or times of the day e.g. less structured break and lunchtime
- friendships and/or difficulties with peers
- sense of belonging (to the class and school community)
- thoughts and feeling around less structured times of the day, including lunchtime and after school activities/clubs
- learning and support needs
- level of comfort in relation to the school and classroom environment
It is also important to discuss what the young person feels is or has worked well in terms of supporting their attendance. Scaling can be a useful tool in terms of taking a quick measure of how a young person might be thinking or feeling. For example:

- On a scale of 0-10 with 10 being ‘I feel fine about school’ or ‘I enjoy school’ where would you put yourself on the scale right now?
- How about last year?
- What would need to happen for you to be one point higher?
Section Seven

Working together

When EBSR has become entrenched or the young person is displaying a level of anxiety that is interfering with their everyday life it may be appropriate to seek further support for the individual and their family. We know that living with a child who is refusing to attend school can be incredibly stressful for the whole family and may have wider social and financial implications.

Typically the first point of contact for the school in terms of any attendance difficulties is with the Educational Welfare Service. This service can be accessed via the local Multi Agency Team (MAT).

Questionnaires returned from the sample of secondary schools indicates that schools vary in terms of the services that they refer a pupil and their family to, these include:

- MAT
- Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS)
- School Health Service or the School Nurse
- EPS

In a minority of cases it may, in the short term, not be possible for an individual to access school and they may be referred to the Out of School Tuition service (OOST). The aim of this service is to reintegrate these pupils back into mainstream education at the earliest opportunity.

Education Welfare Officers (as part of MAT)
All referrals must be made on a MAT Request for Support Form.

It is good practice to have discussed the request for support with the parent and have the parents' consent. The request can be made when the school believes that the underlying reasons for the pupil's absence from school are emotional based.

In most cases the majority of absences will have been authorised by the school, rather than unauthorised. There is no absence trigger. This route is not intended to circumvent or replace referrals to CAMHS and other specialist services.

Request for support from the EWO for unauthorised absences is not affected by this proposal, and should continue to happen in the usual way.
**Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS)**
Where children present with EBSR, CAMHS will initially offer consultation via a Primary Mental Health Worker to the professionals involved.

Further to this, on receipt of a formal referral from an appropriate child care professional which meets CAMHS criteria, an initial assessment of mental health may also be offered to the young person and their family.

It is the role of CAMHS to focus on the assessment and treatment of the mental health component, which may assist in the return to an appropriate education provision.

**Educational Psychology Service (EPS)**
Schools will be offered a Support and Planning meeting with their allocated Educational Psychologist at the beginning of the academic year. At this meeting staff can consult with their Educational Psychologist with regard to any children and young people that may be experiencing EBSR.

Through consultation, the role of the Educational Psychologist in supporting the child, school and family can be determined.

This can encompass a range of activities, for example:

- psychological approaches to help reduce anxiety and to help the young person feel more confident about attending school
- advice to home and school on managing and working with young people with EBSR
- advice on the design and implementation of a reintegration programme into school
- support to parents and/or carers as the programme of reintegration is underway
- facilitation of communication between the young person and parent/careers or young person and staff
- facilitation of communication between professionals via meetings/reviews
- training to school staff.

**Out of School Tuition (OOST)**
Out of School Tuition provides a service for children and young people of compulsory school age who are resident in Derbyshire Local Authority and are temporarily unable to attend their mainstream school on a full-time basis.

Reasons for request for support may include:
- medical
- pregnancy
- emotional or mental health related difficulties
Currently for a request for support to take place needs to be confirmed by a senior health practitioner, such as a School Medical Officer, Consultant Paediatrician, or by CAMHS in writing. A request for support is usually initiated by the school telephoning Out of School Tuition (01773 570939 x232) to discuss the individual circumstances.

Out of School Tuition may provide a tutor for a time limited period and/or offer tuition via the Virtual Classroom. This would typically take place in the child or young person’s home, during school hours and in term-time. There is an expectation that individual pupils would be supported to follow a programme of reintegration with the overall aim to return to school as soon as appropriate. The pupil would remain on roll at their mainstream school during this period and the school would retain responsibility for their education.

Parent Partnership
Parent Partnership is an arms-length, impartial service working with parents/carers of children with Special Educational Needs and those at risk or having been excluded from school.

The service is accessed by parent referral although its relies on school and other Local Authority, Health or Voluntary sector staff to let parents know about us. Parent Partnership offers support by telephone helpline, email and through attendance at meetings and home visits when necessary. It is helpful to Parent Partnership if staff explain to parents that they can't necessarily do school visits or meetings at home.

Parent Partnership currently operate a helpline (01629 533668) for parents which operates Monday-Friday 9:30-3pm.
Section Eight

A planned return

Once an assessment has been completed then a return to school plan should be drawn up in conjunction with parents, school staff and any other agencies involved. The meeting may take place at school, in the home or another setting within the community to allow the young person to participate.

The young person’s views should be included in the planning even if they do not feel that they are able to attend the meeting.

At this stage, depending on the level of anxiety the young person is displaying and the length of time they have been out of school, the following possibilities should be considered:

1. a return to school on a full timetable
2. implementation of a part time timetable with a gradual return
3. consultation with CAMHS and other agencies which may, if necessary, lead to a referral for out of school tuition as part of a reintegration plan

All pupils of compulsory school age are entitled to a full-time education and parents have a legal duty to ensure that their child attends school on a regular basis. However, the DfE advice on school attendance (2013) states that:

‘In very exceptional circumstances there may be a need for a temporary part-time timetable to meet a pupil’s individual needs.’

The advice is clear that a part-time timetable should not be considered a long-term solution but rather as part of a reintegration package.

Any return to school plan should recognise that EBSR is unique to each young person. There also needs to be recognition by those involved with the pupil that sometimes there is no ‘quick fix’ to EBSR. A flexible approach that incorporates the views of all involved and most importantly, the views of the young person, is required. Everyone, school staff and parents, need to share the expectation that the plan, once agreed, will work.

For some young people, who are working on a gradual reintegration package, it can be helpful to put together a step-by-step plan that gradually, over time, exposes them to the situations that are anxiety provoking. This gives the individual some control over the plan and hopefully helps them to feel more confident as each step is achieved.

The plan will be different for each individual but should start with a first step that is achievable. Through discussion with parents and the pupil it should be possible to
identify situations that are more anxiety provoking for the individual than others and therefore would need to be addressed at a later stage and as the pupil’s confidence and comfort levels improve.

It is anticipated that over time, with gradual and supported access to school and specific situations, the child’s anxiety and fears will decrease through a process of habituation and exposure.

Parents, carers and the young person will need to be made aware that initially the individual’s anxiety is likely to increase as they are faced with the prospect of going back into school. This is normal and to be expected.

**Vignette five**

```
School B

We make parents and staff aware it might be six steps forward two steps back at the beginning of every term. We use tools with the young person to help them overcome their anxiety; this might be writing, talking, relaxation or scaling.
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Developing an anxiety or exposure ladder with the young person can be helpful. The individual would be asked to identify the situation in school which they are most worried about, for instance going back into a mainstream lesson and then less fearful situations working down the ladder. On the bottom rung of the ladder would be the situation that the pupil feels least fearful or worried about.

This would be a useful starting point for any subsequent plan with each step being consolidated before moving on.

A blank ladder template had been included for you to use in appendix three and an example is shown on the next page. Each ladder will, of course, reflect the particular thoughts and feelings of the individual.
It can be helpful, for some pupils, to start off by going into the school building, for instance into the reception or office area for a period of time before building up to attendance at specific lessons or less structured times of the day. In some cases it may be helpful for pupils to be met by a member of staff in the school car park or reception area to support the transition between parent and school.

**Vignette six**

**School A**

Where the reasons appear to be more deep-rooted, the student will be offered time in the Student Support Centre where they can start to re-integrate into school, maintain contact with friends and keep up with their curriculum work while staff continue to work to resolve the problems.

Where the issues may involve friendship groups and anti-social behaviour by other students a restorative process or mediation is used.
All of the secondary schools questioned in the Peak 11 cluster had an identified place in school which the young person could access on a temporary basis. These support or inclusion centres were felt to provide a safe base, with an enhanced level of staffing to facilitate reintegration.

**Vignette seven**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Our Inclusion Base offers a flexible timetable and a safe, secure place which enables them to reintegrate into mainstream lessons. The students have the security of knowing that they have a base if they are worried.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is important for each step on the plan to be consolidated before moving on and the plan therefore has to be under constant review with staff liaising with the young person, parents and other members of staff. The plan will need to be adjusted in relation to practical arrangements, how the pupil appears to be reacting and coping, and feedback from parents.

**Further considerations**

A guide published by Anxiety UK looking at anxiety in the context of school suggests that the following issues need to be considered as part of the reintegration process:

- where are they most comfortable sitting in class
- which teachers and members of staff they feel most comfortable with
- how they find it easiest to enter the room
- who they have to support them
- whether or not they can cope with being asked questions in class
- how they get from class to class
- where they feel comfortable in school if they can't get into class.

They also suggest that use of, and access to, toilets and eating in front of people in the dining hall can be sources of anxiety and therefore will need to be a consideration for some young people.

Individual schools will need to consider the resources they have available in terms of supporting pupils to manage their levels of anxiety throughout the school day. For instance schools may have access to the Derbyshire Positive Play or Positive Support programme. There is a wealth of resources available to school staff around promoting relaxation and social skills training, however, we are aware that resources specifically for children and young people experiencing EBSR are considerably lacking.
Some pupils may express a fear around peers, or indeed adults, asking questions about their absence once they re-join the class. School staff can prepare pupils for this by thinking together about appropriate responses or scripts and actually rehearsing ways in which the individual can manage the situation. Likewise adults can support young people by helping them develop positive, alternative thoughts which emphasise the individual’s capacity to cope.

Heyne and Rollings (2002) suggest that some pupils will find it hard to generate coping statements and should be given the opinion of choosing from a pre-prepared list. For instance:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative</th>
<th>Coping</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I can’t do it</td>
<td>I managed it yesterday, I can do it. It will get easier.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s too much</td>
<td>I’m okay, I just need to take it one step at a time. There are people who will help me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m useless at math</td>
<td>There are people in the lesson I can ask for help. I’m not expected to know everything or to catch up straight away.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Vignette eight

School B

Staff will help the young person with ‘catch up’ work, minimising and regulating pressure and liaising with teaching staff about deadlines.
Supporting a successful reintegration back to school

Good practice for schools includes:

- Identifying a member of staff for the young person to ‘check in’ with throughout the day
- Ensuring that any contributing school factors identified have been explored and addressed
- Flexibility in terms of timetabling
- On-going dialogue with parents, carers and the pupil
- Informing staff, including supply teachers or cover staff, about the young person’s difficulties and the agreed reintegration plan
- Identifying a safe place or base in school that the young person can go to if needed
- Utilising a pastoral support programme to identify the effective strategies being used with the young person. This can then be shared with all staff
- Considering whether or not the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) and Team around the Child meetings (TAC) would be helpful in terms of to bringing services, school and home together in planning and reviewing progress over time
- Accessing services, as appropriate, to provide support to the family and to help address any contributing factors
- Having access to a variety of school based interventions to support the pupil, which may include: buddying, mentoring or a Circle of Friends approach
- Supporting the pupil or young person with managing anxious or difficult feelings. This may be done through sessions with pastoral staff or for younger children through school-based resources such as SEAL and the Derbyshire Positive Play programme
- Seeking advice from external agencies and developing staff awareness around the issue of Emotionally Based School Refusal (EBSR)
Section Nine: Sources of information

Websites

Advisory Centre for Education (ACE) www.ace-ed.org.uk
Independent national advice centre for parents and carers, provide guidance on school problems including attendance

Anxiety UK www.anxietyuk.org.uk
Information and resources for parents of children who are experiencing anxiety. Includes a guide for supporting children who are anxious in relation to school

Anti-Bullying www.bullying.co.uk
Providing advice for parents, young people and schools. A free helpline is available

Bully Online www.successunlimited.co.uk
Information about bullying for children, parents and school staff

Kidscape www.kidscape.org.uk
Advice about bullying and protecting children from abuse, aimed at parents and teachers

Kidshealth www.kidshealth.org
Advice and information about common worries for children and young people including sections on divorce and separation

Parent Partnership www.parentpartnership.org.uk
A national organisation which provides independent advice and support for parents and carers of children and young people with Special Educational Needs (SEN). Derbyshire Parent Partnership helpline: 01629 533668

Royal College of Psychiatrists www.rcpsych.ac.uk
Website contains downloadable leaflets and fact sheets about a range of problems and mental health issues affecting children and young people

Young Minds www.youngminds.org.uk
An excellent website with information, advice and publications on mental health with sections for young people, parents/carers and professionals. The publication ‘Stay Cool in School’ is available for electronic download

Winston’s Wish www.winstonswish.org.uk
Bereavement support, information and guidance for children, parents and school staff, includes factsheets and a link to resources
Sources of information:

References websites and further reading

Attendance and EBSR for school staff


Toplis, R. (2004). Parents’ views on emotionally based school refusal. Work at a policy level. In West Sussex County Council EPS (Eds.). Emotionally based school refusal, guidance for schools and support agencies (pp.54-73). West Sussex, UK: West Sussex County Council EPS.


Transition

Young Minds  *The Transition from Primary School to Secondary School*
http://www.youngminds.org.uk/assets/0000/1303/Transitionfromprimarytosecondary.pdf


These last two documents are available via the EPS.
Appendix One: Checklist of Emotionally Based School Refusal (EBSR) Indicators

These will vary and will be unique for each individual child and/or young person. Tick whether the behaviour is observed ‘Never’, ‘Rarely’, ‘Occasionally’ or ‘Frequently’. If you are not sure, tick, ‘Don’t know’. Add any specific information in the comments box.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behaviour Observed</th>
<th>Don’t Know (DK)</th>
<th>Never (N)</th>
<th>Rarely (R)</th>
<th>Occasionally (O)</th>
<th>Frequently (F)</th>
<th>Comments</th>
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<tr>
<td>Severe difficulty attending school with long periods of absence</td>
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<td>Child determined not to leave home and stays away from school with the knowledge of the parent/carer</td>
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<td>Patterns in absences, for example, particular days and/or subjects</td>
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<td>A history of anxiety (or EBSR) in the family</td>
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<td>Reluctance to attend school trips</td>
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<td>Frequent absences for minor illnesses</td>
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<td>Episodes of self-harm</td>
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<td><strong>Anxiety on separation and inappropriate dependence on family members-anxiety expressed about the safety of those at home</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Evidence of under-achievement of learning potential</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Social isolation and avoidance of class mates and peer group</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Regular absence without indication of anti-social behaviours</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Challenging behaviours, in particularly in relation to special situations in school</strong></td>
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<td><strong>The young person expresses a desire to attend classes but is unable to do so</strong></td>
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<td>Severe emotional upset with excessive fearfulness, outbursts of temper and complaints of feeling ill on school days</td>
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<td>Depression and sense of isolation, low self-esteem and lack of confidence</td>
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<td>Confusion or extreme absent mindedness shown in school due to a lack of concentration and subsequently lower attainments</td>
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<td>Physical changes, sweating, sickness, aching limbs, headaches, panic attacks, abdominal pain, rapid weight loss or gain</td>
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<td>Disruption of day to day activities affecting the family and putting parents/carers under a great deal of pressure</td>
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<tr>
<td>School Considerations</td>
<td>Yes/No/Don’t Know</td>
<td>Comment</td>
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<td>Have school got clear procedures for dealing with early concerns about pupil non-attendance?</td>
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<td>Is there a nominated staff member in school who would investigate and communicate these concerns to staff and parents/carers?</td>
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<td>Is there a nominated staff member in school who has responsibility for co-ordinating all of the information and contacts for children at risk of EBSR?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are staff familiar with EBSR? Have they received whole school training on this issue? Can they recognise potential indicators and risk factors of EBSR?</td>
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<td>Do staff know who to communicate their concerns with in relation to EBSR?</td>
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<td>Do school have general information about EBSR which they can share with parents/carers if there are concerns?</td>
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<td>If a pupil is identified as a EBSR, have school fully assessed them in order to gain a full understanding of their needs and the triggers to EBSR?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Answer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are specific strategies and programmes in place to support children experiencing EBSR in school? Are all staff aware of these?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Are there specific strategies and programmes in place to support children if they are reintegrated back into school after a period of absence? Are all staff aware of these?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is there a staff member who acts as a co-ordinator for meetings and can keep the child’s progress under review by ensuring that actions are clarified and shared between all parties including the parent/carer?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is there one key staff member in school that can provide pastoral support to children experiencing EBSR?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Which LEA support services can your school access to support pupils with EBSR? Is school familiar with how you get support from such services (referral processes)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Have the views of the child/young person been sought and heard?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Have the views of the parent/carer been sought and heard?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are staff familiar with pastoral support plans and reintegration plans for children with EBSR?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List the actions that have been identified from completing the above checklist:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Who?</th>
<th>By When?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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</table>
Appendix Three: Ladder template

Most worried about

Least worried about