

# Stockham Primary School

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## Supporting the Emotional Well-being and Mental Health of Our School Community

### Emotionally Based School Avoidance - EBSA

At Stockham Primary School, we are committed to supporting children, staff and parents in their wellbeing and mental health. We know that wellbeing, physical and mental health are all vital to successful learning. This term's Mental Health and Wellbeing newsletter focuses once again on Emotionally Based School Avoidance - EBSA (previously known as 'School Refusal') and attachment.

#### Did you know?

Emotional Based School Avoidance (EBSA), also known as Anxiety-Based School Avoidance (ABSA), is a term used to describe children and young people (CYP) who experience persistent challenges in attending school due to negative feelings, such as anxiety.

It's now called Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) rather than 'school refusal' because 'school refusal' makes it sound like it is the child's choice not to attend.



In reality however, EBSA is actually associated with emotional and physical distress. In short, it's when difficulties attending school have escalated to a point where the CYP has continued to struggle to attend school over a period of time.

#### Why does it happen?

EBSA can happen at any age, and it can be more common among children with additional or special educational needs (SEND).

It can be a stressful and worrying time for you as a parent/carer, so be kind to yourself as well as your child. The most important thing is to listen to your child and to try and be calm, patient and show empathy. It's also important to look after yourself.

School anxiety can happen suddenly or build over time. If it persists, it shouldn't be ignored but rather be explored.

Often, anxiety is at the root and these anxieties can include:

- Social or work pressures at school.
- Difficulties maintaining positive relationships with peers or staff.
- Unmet needs e.g. additional needs or feeling unsafe.
- Home and/or family factors.



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- Sensory needs making the environment feel overwhelming.

How school anxiety might show up at home ...

- Although some of the below may be typical behaviours in childhood development i.e. homework and defiance, some ways you might spot school anxiety in your child includes:
- Not wanting to get up, get ready or go to school.
- Anxiety and heightened emotions when getting ready to leave for school.
- Physical symptoms like headaches, stomach ache or feeling sick.
- Repeatedly complaining of feeling poorly at school.
- A change in behaviour either by becoming more withdrawn or acting out more.
- Trouble sleeping or getting to sleep.
- Performing less well at school or refusing to do any schoolwork at home e.g. reading, homework.
- Tantrums, inflexibility, separation anxiety, avoidance, and defiance may show up too.
- If the child is allowed to stay home, the symptoms quickly disappear, only to reappear the next morning. In some cases, a child may refuse to leave the house.

## Anxiety

The most common way of managing anxiety is avoidance.

When we avoid the anxious situation, we get an immediate relief. However, this is only a short-term solution as when we face the situation the next time the anxiety reaction is much greater due to the increased anticipation of the event. This happens in EBSA. CYP who are anxious about attending school get an immediate sense of relief when they avoid school, however the fear of attending the next day is then much greater. They are then even more likely to avoid school again. This is called an avoidance cycle.

Instead of using avoidance to cope with feeling overwhelmed, we need to support our CYP to:

- Recognise the triggers of their anxiety
- Identify small steps they feel they can take
- Have ways they can calm themselves when they are starting to feel anxious.

This will help them deal with stressful situations throughout life and not become overwhelmed or avoid the things they find challenging.

Remember also that anxiety can make people behave in different ways, for example...

- A desire to control people and events.
- Difficulty getting to sleep.
- Feeling agitated or angry.



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- Having exceptionally high expectations for self, including schoolwork & sports.
- Struggling to pay attention and focus.
- Intolerance of uncertainty.
- Crying and difficulty managing emotions.
- Avoiding activities or events (including school).
- Over planning for situations and events.
- Feeling worried about situations or events.
- Pain like stomach-aches and headaches.
- Defiance and other challenging behaviours.

## The Anxiety Iceberg

Sometimes however, children simply can't express why they are anxious.

Young Minds recommends drawing an 'anxiety iceberg' with them. Here's a video explaining how:

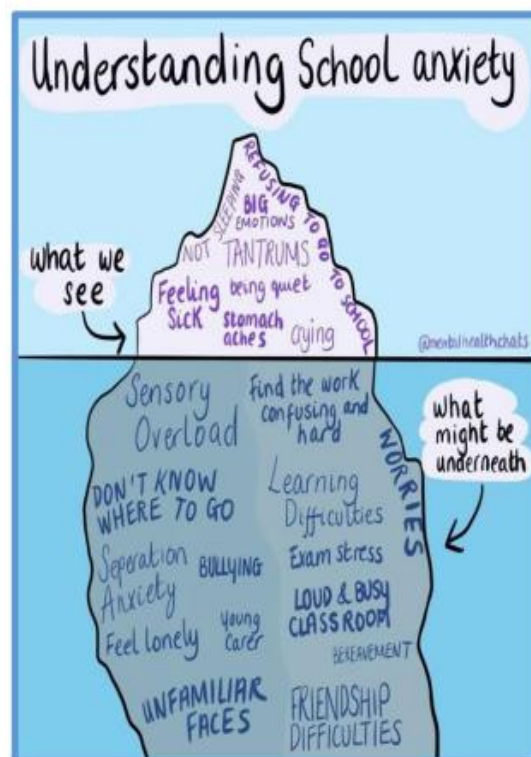
<https://youtu.be/s5lqvDmJ9I>

What can parents/carers do to help?

**Help identify issues** - Try to find out why your child is avoiding school. At a time when you're both feeling calm (and not on busy school mornings), ask your child to describe the key challenges of going to school. Gently ask about what is making school feel hard. Is your child struggling with friendships? Are they worried about their work? Are they fearful of being separated from their parents for a full day? Together, you may be able to solve these problems or develop a plan to manage them.

**Be empathetic but firm** - Tell them you are confident they can face their fears. Let your child know that while physical symptoms of anxiety, such as stomach aches headaches and tiredness, can be unpleasant, they often ease up as the school day progresses and children overcome their fears.

**Create a morning routine** - A daily routine can give a feeling of security and reduce your stress! Pack bags and lay uniform out the night before. In the morning, focus on completing one task before moving on. For example, say 'Put your socks on first,' rather than making the goal too big. E.g. 'Get ready for school.' If your child isn't able to get into school, avoid arguing with them and be supportive of any small achievements they make, like putting their uniform on or walking to the school gates, even if they can't go in.



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