

Emotionally-Based School Avoidance (EBSA): A Parent's Guide

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How Does It Happen?

It often starts subtly with a few missed days here or there, and can increase into longer absences. Triggers may include social rejection, learning challenges, bullying, transitions, sensory overload, or life events at home. The more school is avoided, the harder return feels.











Recognising the Signs:

How to Recognise EBSA vs. Typical School Dislike:

Recognising EBSA early allows for targeted support, helping young people to gradually feel more comfortable in the school environment.

- **Patterns:** Look for specific days, subjects, or events that trigger avoidance, rather than general complaints.
- **Physical Symptoms:** Children with EBSA might report frequent illnesses or display anxiety symptoms on school mornings.
- **Underlying Emotions:** Emotional distress is usually apparent, linked to social anxieties, fear of academic pressure, or a strong desire to stay home where they feel secure.

Key Strategies for Parents

-  Stay calm and empathetic: Validate your teens feelings without immediately problem-solving.
-  Keep routines consistent: Help your teen orient to the day even if they're not attending.
-  Break it down: Getting dressed or checking in at the school gate are wins. Start small.
-  Use low-demand parenting: When entrenched, reduce pressure, even around basics. Focus on co-regulation, trust, and gentle connection.
-  Stay connected: Sit with them during breakfast, leave notes, send a short message. Small simple, low-pressure gestures matter.
-  Work with school, don't go it alone: Ask for a phased, flexible plan. Start with a subject they enjoy or time with a trusted adult.
-  Think 'today and tomorrow': Long-term planning can be overwhelming. Focus on the next step.
-  Label emotions gently: Tools like traffic light feelings or 1–10 scales can help them express what they can't yet explain.
-  Balance rock and sponge: Absorb their emotions without losing your steadiness. Boundaries still matter.
-  Accept who they are: Let go of how you thought school would look and focus on what your child needs right now.

Autism and School Avoidance - Specific Considerations

Autistic teens often face:

- Sensory overwhelm (e.g., corridors, canteens, noise)
- Exhaustion from masking or social demands
- Unpredictability and rapid transitions
- Meltdowns or shutdowns linked to autistic burnout



Other co-occurring challenges:

EBSA often overlaps with:

- Anxiety and depression
- ADHD (and executive function struggles)
- Eating disorders or gender identity stress
- Self-harm
- Chronic illness (e.g. diabetes, fatigue-related conditions)

Each needs thoughtful support. If suicidal thoughts or self-harm are involved, prioritise safety planning and seek professional input urgently.

Seeking Help

Start with:

- Your school's pastoral lead, SENCO, or head of year
- GP or CAMHS referral for mental health support
- Local authority (especially when school absence is long-term or complex)

Tip: If you're offered early interventions like parenting courses, even if they feel basic, engage. Many services require 'tick box' steps before offering higher-level support. Doing so demonstrates commitment and unlocks more tailored help.

Working with your School

Be honest, consistent, and collaborative. Ask for:

- A flexible, step-by-step return plan
- Short-term adjustments like reduced timetable or supported transitions
- Emotional coaching for peers — e.g., explaining how to welcome a returning pupil without making them feel exposed

Although each school operates differently, they may be able to:

- o Offer alternative safe spaces (like a quiet room)
- o Use trusted staff, sixth form mentors, or art/drama teachers as informal support
- o Involve an educational psychologist, even if your child isn't yet diagnosed
- o Accept home-based EP assessments or remote interaction if attendance is impossible

What to Remember



You're not alone. Many parents feel judged or confused when their child refuses school. Trust your instincts and seek support early.

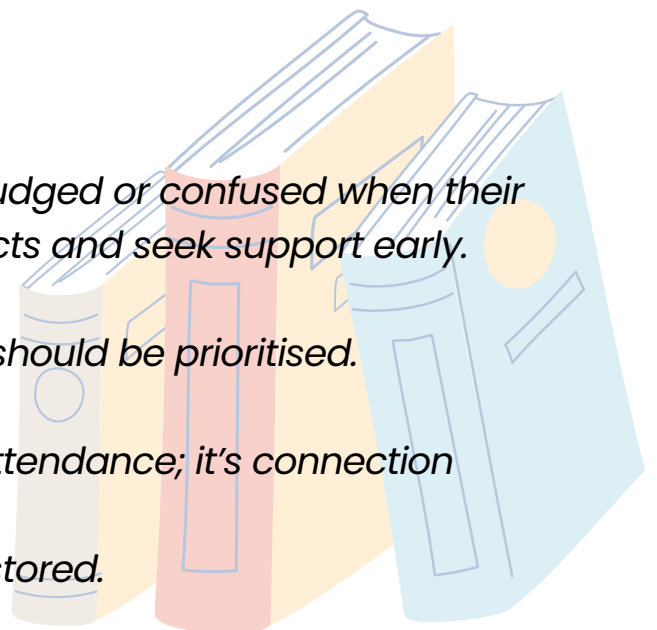


Mental health and emotional safety should be prioritised.



Reframing helps: The goal isn't just attendance; it's connection and confidence.

Learning will return when safety is restored.



Worried about non-attendance or falling behind?

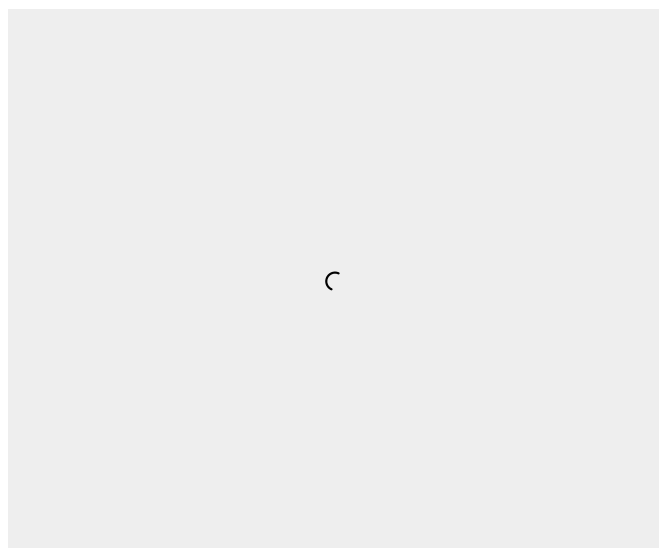
Yes, absence can affect learning, but mental health and belonging matter more in the long run. Reframing the goal as “reconnection” before reintegration helps keep things grounded.

Help your teen see why being at school, however reduced, opens up future choices and maintains social confidence. Emphasise that this is about possibility, not pressure. Your teen won't thrive until they feel safe.

“ Conclusion

Recovery from EBSA is possible, but often it takes time, flexibility, and support. If your teen can't yet face school, don't panic. Take it one day at a time, keep the door open, focus on trust, and always remember, every small step counts. ”

There are many sessions on the [Let's all Talk Mental Health Hub](#) for you to view on emotional regulation and related issues, including the talk linked below.



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