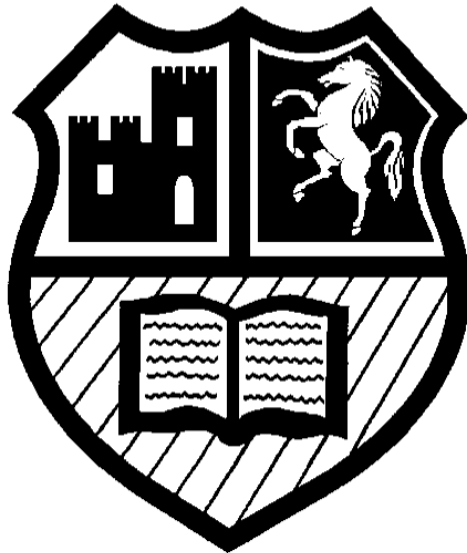


Otford Primary School



Emotional Based Avoidance Policy

Date: March 2026

For review: March 2028



Introduction

Oxford Primary School is an inclusive school that prioritises the wellbeing, safety and belonging of every child. We recognise that for some children attending school can become emotionally overwhelming and that absence from school may be linked to emotional distress rather than deliberate non-attendance.

Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) is a broad umbrella term used to describe children and young people who experience significant difficulty attending school due to emotional factors, often resulting in prolonged absence.

A clear distinction is made between pupils who are absent from school due to truancy and those who experience emotional distress associated with attending school (Thambirajah, Grandison & De-Hayes, 2008).

Although literature historically used the phrase *school refusal*, this terminology can be misleading as the term implies that the young person has full control over the behaviour. This can locate the difficulty within the child rather than recognising the wider contextual factors that influence school attendance.

As highlighted by Thambirajah et al. (2008):

“School refusal occurs when stress exceeds support, when risks are greater than resilience and when ‘pull’ factors that promote school non-attendance overcome the ‘push’ factors that encourage attendance.”

Oxford Primary School recognises that EBSA is often relational and systemic in nature and therefore requires a compassionate, collaborative and flexible response involving the child, family, school staff and external professionals where appropriate.

Terminology

The term Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) is used throughout this policy to describe attendance difficulties driven by emotional distress such as anxiety, trauma, sensory overwhelm, low mood or unmet needs.

This term is preferred to “Anxiety Based School Avoidance (ABSA)” as not all cases are solely related to anxiety.

Causes of EBSA

There is no single cause for EBSA. Research suggests that a combination of factors relating to the child, family, school environment and wider community may contribute.

Kearney and Silberman (1990) identified four common functions of school avoidance behaviour:

1. Avoidance of uncomfortable emotions linked to school (e.g. anxiety about noise, toilets, transitions or tests)
2. Avoidance of stressful situations such as social or academic demands (e.g. reading aloud, group work, feeling left out at playtime)
3. Reducing separation anxiety or seeking reassurance from caregivers
4. Pursuing reinforcing activities outside school (e.g. staying at home, screen time, familiar routines)

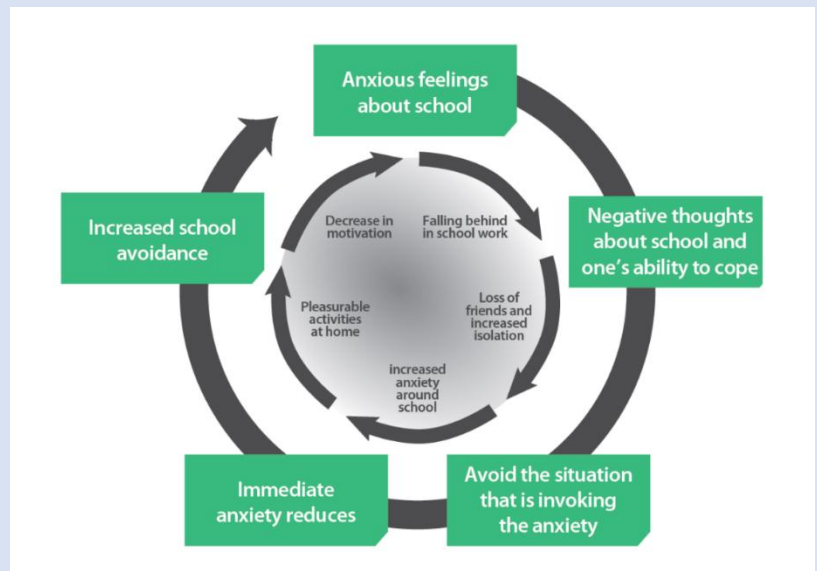
Oxford Primary School recognises that these factors are rarely isolated and often interact with each other.

Anxiety and EBSA

Anxiety is frequently associated with EBSA. Whilst some anxiety is a normal part of development, some children may experience heightened levels that significantly affect their ability to attend school.

Children experiencing EBSA may:

- express intense worries about attending school
- experience physical symptoms such as nausea, headaches or shaking
- become distressed the evening before or morning of school
- struggle to leave home or enter the school building



Avoidance behaviours can develop as a way of coping with overwhelming feelings.

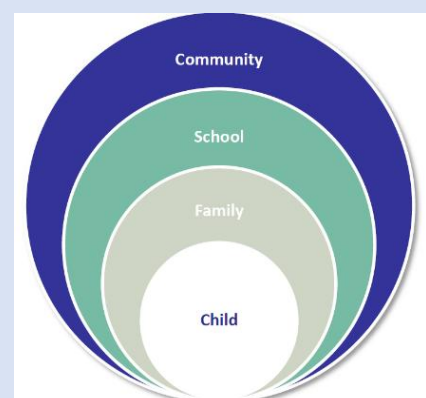
Heyne and Rollings (2002) emphasise the importance of considering the child's perception of their ability to cope with social and academic demands. Negative beliefs about coping ability may increase anxiety and contribute to ongoing absence.

Understanding Vulnerability to EBSA

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model helps us consider the child within the context of multiple interacting systems.

Child Factors

- temperament
- fear of failure
- low self-confidence
- physical illness
- traumatic experiences
- separation anxiety
- developmental stage or transition points



Children who are neurodivergent may be more vulnerable to EBSA.

This may include children who are autistic or who have ADHD, sensory processing differences, speech and language needs, or other special educational needs.

Sensory overload, unpredictability, social communication demands and transitions may contribute to increased anxiety in school environments.

Family Factors

- **changes in family circumstances**
- **parental physical or mental health difficulties**
- **family stress**
- **bereavement or loss**
- **separation anxiety within the family dynamic**

School Factors

School experiences may also contribute to EBSA.

Possible factors include:

- **academic pressure**
- **difficulties with specific subjects**
- **transitions between year groups or schools**
- **peer relationship difficulties**
- **bullying**
- **difficulties with staff relationships**
- **structure of the school day**
- **transport or journey to school**

Additional school factors may include sensory overload, lack of predictability, friendship breakdowns, rigid behaviour systems or unmet special educational needs.

Societal and Community Factors

Broader societal experiences may also influence attendance patterns.

These may include:

- **reduced opportunities to develop social confidence**
- **increased use of digital technology at home**
- **community stress or trauma**
- **increased family anxiety about health or safety**

Supporting emotional well-being and confidence

Support across the child's environments can strengthen emotional wellbeing and support school attendance.

Child

- developing self-confidence and self-esteem
- understanding the connection between thoughts, feelings and behaviour
- developing emotional regulation skills
- feeling safe, listened to and understood

Family

- collaborative relationships between school and home
- shared understanding of the child's needs
- supportive parenting strategies

School

- positive relationships with trusted adults
- flexible approaches to learning and wellbeing
- opportunities for success
- listening to and valuing the voice of the child

The child's voice will be central to all planning and decision-making wherever possible.

Early Identification

Early identification is essential. The longer EBSA difficulties persist, the more entrenched avoidance behaviours may become.

Oxford Primary School monitors attendance patterns carefully and will explore concerns sensitively with families when emotional barriers to attendance are suspected.

Graduated Response

Support for pupils experiencing EBSA will follow the graduated approach outlined in the SEND Code of Practice (Assess – Plan – Do – Review).

Support strategies will be regularly reviewed with the child, parents and relevant professionals.

Attendance Guidance

The school's approach to EBSA aligns with national attendance guidance and prioritises supportive intervention rather than punitive responses.

Where absence is linked to emotional distress, the school will work collaboratively with families to reduce barriers to attendance.

Information Gathering

Understanding the child's experience is an essential first step.

Information should be gathered from:

- the child
- parents or carers
- school staff

- relevant professionals

A push and pull factors framework can be used to explore influences affecting attendance.

School	Home
<p>Push towards attending school e.g. Expected in maths, writing, reading. Making good progress in school. Enjoys learning.</p>	<p>Push towards staying at home e.g. feeling of safety & familiarity, mum is at home, I don't have to leave her, I know I can do home learning.</p>
<p>Pull away from school e.g. there are lots of children about, it is noisy around school, I don't like PE.</p>	<p>Pull away from school-other factors e.g. I am finding it hard to sleep, I do not want to be separated from my mum.</p>

Gathering Information with the Child

Strategies may include:

- child review meetings
- drawing activities
- emotion scales
- body mapping
- anxiety scales
- life graphs

Children may find it easier to communicate through drawing or visual tools rather than verbal discussion.

Adults should acknowledge anxieties while avoiding reinforcing avoidance behaviours.

Gathering Information with Parents

The school will work in partnership with parents to understand the child's experiences.

Initial discussions may include:

- family perspectives
- recent changes in circumstances
- current morning routines
- previous strategies that have helped

A "Talk Around the Child" meeting may be used to bring together key adults supporting the child.

Working with Staff

Staff who know the child well can provide valuable insights.

Information may be gathered about:

- learning strengths
- relationships with peers
- relationships with staff
- potential triggers
- effective support strategies

School-Based Intervention

Once information has been gathered, the school will develop a support plan.

This may include:

- assigning a trusted key adult
- identifying safe spaces within school
- creating a predictable daily structure
- introducing regulation strategies
- adapting aspects of the school day

Interventions will be reviewed regularly in collaboration with the child and family (typically every 2–4 weeks).

Examples of Support Strategies

Support strategies may include:

- flexible start times
- gradual re-integration plans
- reduced timetables
- quiet lunch spaces
- safe exit passes
- visual timetables
- calm start routines
- sensory supports
- movement breaks

Multi-Agency Support

Where appropriate, the school may seek support from external services.

This may include:

- Educational Psychology Services
- Early Help
- School Health services
- Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)
- Local Authority attendance support teams

Safeguarding

Where prolonged absence occurs, safeguarding considerations will always be reviewed in line with the school's safeguarding procedures.

Promoting Recovery

When supporting children returning to school after significant absence, the following principles are important:

- **A Sense of Safety** - it is important that adults, children and young people feel safe upon their return to school.
- **A Sense of Calm** - children and young people are likely to experience a range of emotions including both pleasant and unpleasant emotions. It is important that these are normalised and they are given support to help them manage their emotions and return to a state of calm.
- **A Sense of Self - Collective Efficacy**-children need to feel they have some control over what is happening to them, and a belief that their actions are likely to lead to generally positive outcomes. They need to feel they belong to a group that is likely to experience positive outcomes. This is known as collective efficacy.
- **Social Connectedness** - is important that adults, children and young people feel they belong and have a social network who can support them within the educational setting.
- **Promoting Hope** - Whilst things may feel difficult at the moment, it is important that adults, children and young people feel things will get better and work out in future. They need to be provided with reassurance and understand that in the long term they will feel positive again.

These principles help children regain confidence and a sense of belonging within school.

Home Learning

Where appropriate, light-touch learning activities may be provided to help maintain a connection with school.

The primary focus will remain on supporting the child's emotional readiness to attend school.

Support Plan

Each child experiencing EBSA will have a personalised support plan.

This may include:

- emotion scales or communication tools
- identification of triggers
- coping strategies
- named key adults
- safe spaces
- adaptations to the school day
- a graduated return to school

Graduated Return to School

A gradual reintegration process may include stages such as:

- entering school when the playground is quiet
- spending time in a safe space
- engaging in short learning activities
- joining specific lessons
- gradually increasing time in class

- **building peer connections**

This process will always be personalised in consultation with the child and their family.

Preventative Whole School Approaches

Oxford Primary School recognises that prevention is essential.

Whole-school strategies include:

- **strong pastoral support**
- **predictable routines**
- **emotionally supportive classrooms**
- **inclusive behaviour practices**
- **early identification of emotional needs**
- **strong relationships between staff, children and families**

Policy Review: This policy will be reviewed regularly to ensure it reflects current guidance and best practice.

APPENDIX – Resources/Examples

Working with the Child

Any child currently avoiding school will become anxious when asked to discuss returning. They currently manage feelings of anxiety by employing the avoidant behaviour of not going to school, so any talk about going back to school is going to raise their anxiety as you are proposing to take away their way of coping with their fears. A good place to start any assessment with a young person is to acknowledge it may be difficult but you would like to know what they think and feel.

It is important that the adult does not dismiss anxieties or worries the child has, empathise with the young person but do not collude or promote the ABSA.

The approaches taken will depend on the child's age, level of understanding and language. Even if they are able, often children find it difficult to verbalise what they are thinking and feeling and they may prefer to draw what they are feeling or have visual prompts.

Some example activities or questions could include:

Think about your thoughts and feelings about school and what these would look like if they could be drawn?

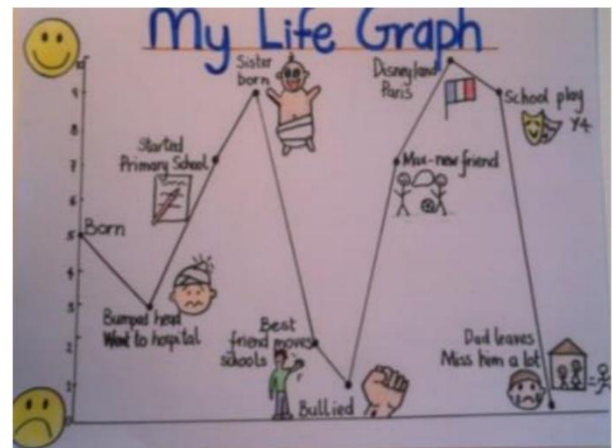
It also helps to externalise the anxiety:

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

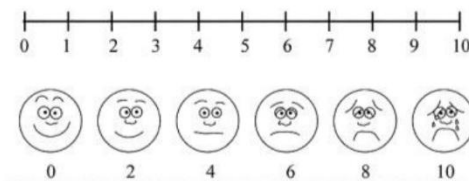
Ask them to draw how their body feels when they are worried. Use an anxiety thermometer or a scale to ask the child what aspects of school they find difficult some areas to consider include:

- The physical environment e.g. toilets, corridors, assembly hall.
- Times of the day or social interactions e.g. arriving at school, play and breaktimes, lining up to go into school or classroom, lunchtimes, going home, changing for PE
- Particular lessons or activities within lessons e.g. writing, working as part of a group, reading aloud, verbally answering a question

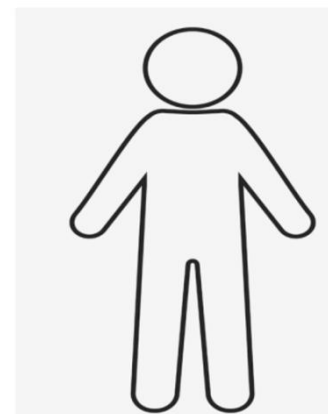
A Life Graph can help children to tell their story so far and what they would like to do in the future.













Feelings and Anxiety scales can give children a tool for expressing their feelings.



A body map can help a child to explain where they are feeling their various emotions.



Landscape of fear can help a child to express their feelings

1. Answering questions in class 	2. Listening when the teacher explains what we are going to do 	3. Following instructions 	4. Knowing what to do to start a task 	5. Working on my own. 
6. Working with a learning partner 	7. Working in a group 	8. Asking a teacher for help when I have not understood something 	9. Working in a quiet class 	10. Working when other children are messing about 

Working with parents

It is important that school take time to build a collaborative partnership working together in the best interest of the child. Sometimes parents may have had similar experiences to their child and may experience their own anxiety making it difficult for them.

An initial meeting should gather background information, establish the current situation and the parent's views – refer: Talk around the child meeting form.

In consultation with the parent, a 10 day strategy should be put into place to support the child's return to school. If the strategy is unsuccessful daily phone contact with the parent will be established, SLT/ Inclusion Manager will be informed and alternative strategies will be implemented.

If the child is not in school, parents will be expected to support home learning provided by the school, unless there is a medical reason and the child is unable to complete their learning schedule.

Working with school staff

It is essential that representatives from schools seek information from members of staff who work most closely with the child or young person. We all respond differently according to the environment, situations or task and with different people. Each member of staff may have valuable information to help identify triggers for anxiety and strategies the young person responds positively to.

In particular it is important to seek out the views of any members of staff the young person speaks positively about and any member of staff where relationships may be more difficult.

Ref: Staff Talk around the child

Support Plan

Produce a support plan to increase a child's attendance at school and a graduated return to school.

Areas to consider:

- Emoji scale and cards to express range of feelings: okay, sad, wobbly, overwhelmed.
- Things that make me feel upset or overwhelmed.
- Strategies that help me.
- Key adults to offer support.
- Safe space.
- Changes to start, end of school day, timetable, lunch-time, play-time.
- Propose the process for the graduated return to school.
- Agreed home schooling plan should the child not attend school.

Sample Process

Process 1

Child arrives at 9:15 when the playground is clear and goes to the reception area.

Child is met by designated person and they go to the Library/ Peaceful Pod/ Leap Pad (safe spaces)

Child looks at daily schedule with designated person.

Child is given visual timetable so they can post each part of their day.

Agreed mindful warm up is completed-specific time.

Learning time in Peaceful Pod/ Leap Pad/ Library

Child meets 2 peers at break-time-stay in safe space or go to an agreed place.

Learning time in safe space

Child meets 2 peers at lunch-time-stay in safe space or go to an agreed place.

Learning time in safe space.

Process 2

Child arrives at 9:15 when the playground is clear and goes to the reception area.

Child is met by designated person and they go to the safe spaces as listed above

Child looks at daily schedule with designated person.

Child is given visual timetable so they can post each part of their day.

Agreed mindful warm up is completed-specific time.

Learning time in safe space

Student meets 2 peers at break-time-stay in safe space or go to an agreed place.

Learning time in safe space

Student meets 2 peers at lunch-time-stay in safe space or go to an agreed place.

Learning time in classroom-sat with chosen peer.

Process 3

Child arrives at 9:15 when the playground is clear and goes to the reception area.

Child is met by designated person and they go to the safe space

Child looks at daily schedule with designated person.

Child is given visual timetable so they can process each part of their day.

Agreed mindful warm up is completed-specific time.

Learning time in safe space

Student meets 2 peers at break-time-stay in safe space or go to an agreed place.

Learning time in class-sat with chosen peer.

Process 4

Child arrives at 9:15 when the playground is clear and goes to the reception area.

Child is met by designated person and they go to the safe space

Child looks at daily schedule with designated person.

Child is given visual timetable so they can post each part of their day.

Agreed mindful warm up is completed-specific time.

Learning time in class-sat with chosen peer.

Process 5

Child arrives at 9:15 when the playground is clear and goes to the reception area.

Child is met by designated person and they go to the classroom.

Child looks at daily schedule with designated person.

Child is given visual timetable so they can post each part of their day.

Agreed mindful warm up is completed-specific time-in class.

Learning time in class-sat with chosen peer.

This process would be adapted in consultation with the parent and child.

Possible Adaptations

Child goes into class for specific subjects after process 1.

Child leaves at lunchtime as part of process 1.

Child goes to the playground for lunch as part of process 2 but returns to safe space after lunch.

Documents to be used as part of the EBSA package.

- **Emotion scales & emoji cards for non-verbal communication.**
- **Visual Timetables**
- **Pupil Profile-push-pull factors.**
- **Anxiety Questionnaire (Pupil and Parent)**
- **Talk around the child meeting form**
- **Staff questionnaire**
- **Child Review**
- **Support Plan**
- **Profile of risk for EBSA**