



*'Happy, Safe, Progress'*

## **Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA): General strategies for how to help your child at home**

(Adapted from Emotionally Based School Avoidance – Guidance for Schools, Integrated Services for Learning Hertfordshire County Council, March 2021)

### **Develop a plan for the evenings and mornings before school**

It is helpful to have calming evening and morning routines. Preparing as much as possible the night before (lay out uniform, prepare lunch boxes and snacks, ensure PE kit is ready to go and school bag is packed) will ensure everything is ready and allow for the morning to run more smoothly and calmly.

### **Things to Consider on the Evenings Before School:**

Here are some suggestions about how you can support your child in preparation for school. It is important to consider a plan that will suit the needs of your child. The plan could be made with your child so they can contribute their ideas and thoughts. The following suggestions have been adapted from **Tina Rae's Sunday Evening/Monday Morning work**.

<b>Soothe</b>	Think of some calming activities you can do with your child before bedtime e.g. gentle music, talk about three good things, snuggle up and read a story, before bed.
<b>Empathy</b>	Let your child know you understand their feelings and validate these rather than dismiss them. Reassure them you understand how hard this is at the moment, and that you are there to support them
<b>Neutralise</b>	Encourage your child to record any worries in a worry book and talk through each one, helping them to see solutions or identify if they are catastrophising. Show them the evidence against any irrational thoughts.
<b>Decide</b>	Establish what a successful day may look like and decide with your child what needs to happen the evening before to make this happen. Go through their schedule step by step and ensure that everything is ready (e.g. books, bag, PE kit) and laid out for the morning. Make this plan visual if necessary.
<b>Attend</b>	Be aware of your child's emotional state and provide more time and attention if needed. Consider giving a transitional object to reassure them that they can think of you during the day. It is often useful for you both to have an item, so that they know you are thinking of them as well (friendship bracelet, little stone gem, matching hearts, matching photos, matching mini soft toys).

**Positivity** Discuss any aspects of the day that your child is looking forward to – this may be certain lessons, pastoral time, sports club, seeing friends, break times or something that you are doing together after school

**Yourself** Make sure that you feel calm yourself. If necessary, take time out to use your own self-calming strategies.

### **Listen to your child and acknowledge their feelings:**

Children are more likely to talk to their parents or carers about their worries than anyone else.

Things you **should do** when talking to your child about their worries:

- Show them you are actively listening through your body language, facial expressions, eye contact and saying things such as ‘hmmm’ and ‘yeah’;
- Give your child time to say what they want to say in their own words;
- Sometimes when our children talk about their worries, this makes us feel very anxious. It’s important that you try to stay calm throughout the discussion (picture being a swan on the surface of the water – whatever your own feelings and emotions (however your feet are paddling beneath the water), portray calm (the serene swan on the surface);
- Acknowledge that your child’s fears are real to them to empathise with how they are feeling. For example: *“I can hear that you’re feeling really worried about going back into school on Monday. I’m sorry. That must be really tough for you”*.

Things you **shouldn’t do** when talking to your child about their worries:

- Say your child shouldn’t feel worried. This will make them think their feelings are not valid;
- Allow them to talk endlessly about their anxiety in depth. Doing so may inadvertently give them more attention for being anxious than for being brave;
- Argue about the anxiety or try to ‘jolly’ them out of the emotion.

It may be enough for you to just sit with your child and listen. You do not have to ‘fix’ the problem for your child there and then.

Some children may not openly say that they feel anxious about school, but they may show it in their behaviour. If this is your child, it may be helpful for you to start the conversation with them, for example:

- *It sounds like you’re feeling worried about going into school today. Am I right?*
- *You’re upset thinking that you might meet Joe in the playground. Tell me a bit more about that.*
- *You’re feeling scared about me dropping you off at school and leaving you. Am I right?*

### **Encourage your child to use their coping skills:**

When your child begins to show signs of anxiety, ask them what they think could help them cope with their feelings or what would make things feel better. If your child has been learning some calming strategies model using them (e.g. start playing with playdough or blowing bubbles, with the aim of them mirroring). Some example of things you could say include:

- *What could you do to help you handle these feelings?*
- *Which one of the calming strategies you’ve been learning about could you have a go at?*

- *Have you thought about trying....?*
- *Well done. You came up with some great ideas.*

It may be helpful for you to talk about times when you have been anxious and how you coped with those feelings. For example, for a child who is worried about making mistakes, it is helpful for you to acknowledge when you make a mistake and what you are going to do to repair the situation, such as apologise and correct the mistake. It is also fun to explore inventions which came from mistakes, such as penicillin, post it notes, the microwave etc.

### **Reduce attention for anxious behaviours:**

Children work for adult attention, positive and negative. Whatever you give attention to, they will do more of.

Parents and carers need to listen carefully to their child and acknowledge their worries. However, sometimes the balance between paying attention to their child's worries and helping their child to manage their anxieties becomes skewed in an unhelpful way. Parents /carers should make sure that they aren't inadvertently giving more attention to anxious behaviours (for example, by reassuring, hugging, coaxing, pleading), than to times when their child is trying to be more confident.

If your child starts to display anxious behaviours, you should try to limit attention you give to behaviour such as whining, complaining and yelling. Instead, acknowledge the anxious feelings and encourage your child to use their coping strategies.

### **Limit verbal reassurance:**

Children can sometimes become "hooked" on adult reassurance to make them feel safe. When anxious children ask for and receive reassurance from their parents, this creates short-term relief. However, soon the child starts to feel worried again and they ask for reassurance again. For some children, this can become a never-ending cycle, with the child relying on reassurance from their parents, instead of using their own skills to help them calm down, ultimately increasing the negative emotions.

If your child asks for reassurance repeatedly, try to help them to realise that their questions are driven by anxiety. You could say things like, "I understand you are feeling scared". Start with acknowledging the child's feelings.

### **Give frequent, specific praise for brave behaviour**

It is important that your child feels like their efforts are recognised, and you may need to point out when your child made progress. For example:

- *Wow, I'm so proud of you that you put on your school uniform today without a fuss;*
- *You did such a great job of thinking of things you could do to calm down;*
- *I could see you were scared, but you hung on in there and didn't try to run away. Amazing!*

### **Manage your own emotions in front of your child**

Children look to their parents / carers to see how they respond to situations and are very good at reading their parent's / carer's cues. If you look anxious, your child will interpret this as a sign that they should be worried (or confirm their worried feelings) and it will make them feel that the situation is not safe.

It is important that you try to remain calm as much as possible, so that your child does not get the impression that the situation is unmanageable. You should also try to remain positive and give the impression that you believe the situation can get better. It can be very hard to remain calm and upbeat when you see your child is anxious and upset. You may find it helpful to share how you are feeling with someone you trust so that you can get support for yourself in managing your emotions.

### **Don't let your child avoid situations that make them feel anxious**

Sometimes parents try to reduce their child's exposure to things that they find distressing, even when these things are in fact safe. For example, they may write a letter saying that their child is sick on a day they have a test their child is worried about. This gives the child the message that the distressing feelings are too hard for them to cope with and that it is better to avoid situations that make them scared. This can increase the child's anxiety.

It's helpful for you to give a consistent message that everyone is working towards your child attending school and you feel your child can handle things. At the same time, you should reassure your child that you will work together with the school to make school a happier place for them. You can tell your child that you are proud of them for being brave and trying to return to school, as you know they are scared. This will require you to have a strong will, determination and persistence!

### **Be positive about school**

Encourage your child to focus their attention on positive aspects of school (e.g. their friends, their favourite lesson/teacher, activities they enjoy doing) instead of the negatives (i.e. why they are finding it difficult to attend). When they start to attend school, get them to complete a simple gratitude journal or encourage them to identify one thing that has gone well at school each day, recording this visually in a book or chart to be referred to later.

Remind your child that although school can be hard, there are lots of fun and interesting things to do at school. For example, there might have been a new experience they had because of going to school, or particular lesson(s) that they liked.

You could encourage your child to consider how attending school ties in with their own personal goals and ambitions, for example, having friends, getting qualifications, pursuing interests, moving towards a career they want.

However, sometimes reminding a child that it is important to attend school can add too much pressure, too quickly. If this is the case, instead talk about taking things slowly and how you are there to support them.

### **Keep clear and predictable routines if your child is not at school**

If your child is not attending school, it is still important to maintain structure and routine as this will help to reduce their anxiety.

- You could use a visual timetable to explain what activities your child will be doing in the day;
- Encourage your child to get dressed into their school uniform (even if they don't end up going to school);
- Tell your child that you expect them to complete any work set by their teachers;
- Encourage your child to make sure they get enough sleep, exercise and eat a healthy diet, as these will impact on their physical and mental well-being. It is also important for them to spend time outside as this can support positive mental health.

- Limit screen time to work-related tasks, research and remote learning and save games for out of school hours.

### **Consider seeking medical advice and support**

You should consider discussing any health concerns with your child's GP. This may be appropriate if their anxiety impacts upon regular attendance at school or if it occurs on top of other psychological concerns (self-harm, depression, suicidal threats or eating concerns etc.). The GP or school may request a referral to CAMHS (Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services) for specialist mental health assessment and support if they feel that this is appropriate and necessary.

### **How you can help if your child has separation anxiety**

#### 1. Have a set routine for dropping off your child

The following suggestions could be considered depending on the age and developmental level of the child:

- Pass your child to a trusted adult, ensure the school have arranged for a trusted adult to meet and greet your child each morning, if appropriate;
- Have a clear routine for saying goodbye to your child (e.g. a kiss on the head or a funny wave or funny phrase and a clear goodbye) so they know exactly what is going to happen. This could be a game (e.g. "how many kisses and squeezes would you like today, 2 or 3?");
- Reassure your child that you will see them later, including being explicit about when that will be and what you will do together. Ensure you are always on time (early) to collect them and always be in the same place so anxiety does not rise while they try to find you.
- Give the message you believe your child can cope;
- Be kind but firm, and stay positive if your child becomes upset;
- Leave quickly without drawing out the goodbyes. Don't "sneak away".

#### 2. Give your child a transitional object

A transitional object is something that can be used to remind your child that you continue to think about them and are connected to them even though you are apart. Examples of transitional objects include: a bracelet; a photo of you; a note in your child's lunchbox; a cuddly toy, a little gem stone or other comforter; or a small item of clothing belonging to you. Equally, it could be something intangible, like a kiss (or something else) drawn on a hand (e.g. the hug button) or perfume sprayed on your child's shirt. You and your child could also take the same thing to school and to work to show that you are thinking about each other (e.g. a special button sewn inside a jumper).

An item to take home from school at the end of the day or during the holidays (e.g. class mascot to take photos of in different places / plant to look after / set of Lego to build and bring back etc.) may help bridge the gap between home and school and give you child a reason to come back in the next day.

### **How you can help if your child is at home during the school day and engages in lots of pleasurable activities**

Some children engage in lots of pleasurable and rewarding activities while they are at home during the school day. This can inadvertently reinforce their desires to avoid school. This can happen when:

- parents and children spend more quality time together during school hours than outside school hours;
- the child spends a lot of time during school hours engaging in highly motivating, unthreatening and possibly addictive activities such as gaming.

Try to focus on school work and learning during the school day and give lots of positive attention and praise for school related tasks and learning. During school hours, try to limit screen time to schoolwork and avoid all gaming until after school hours.

For some children, screen time is a way to manage their anxiety. Online, they can engage in a world where they feel safe and in control. Telling these children to stop using their screens can sometimes trigger stress responses that can result in aggressive behaviours. This can be very distressing for parents. The following strategies are referenced in Yvonne Newbold's blog on how to get the balance right in screen-time with children with special educational needs.

These ideas may help your child to accept limits on screen time more readily:

- Give lots of warning that it's time to stop screen time;
- Give them some choice about when to finish. For example, do you want to finish in two minutes or five minutes?
- Consider joining in with their screen time for the last couple of minutes;
- Move onto another enjoyable activity;
- Let your child know when they will be able to access screen time again;
- Use a visual timetable so they can see visually when they can access screen time

There are organisations who can support you if you are experiencing violence from your child. Please seek support from your child's school.

Make school seem more appealing to your child

You could suggest to staff that they use your child's interests to engage them in work or encourage your child to attend lessons they particularly enjoy, even if they are out of school for most of their lessons.

You may want to consider giving your child rewards for attending school (for example, going to the park or swimming together if they go into school for the target amount of time on that day or if they engage in their set learning task at home).

Above all, remember the avoidance is being driven by anxiety. At all times, children and parents / carers need to be thinking 'how can I help reduce this child's stress, to make this easier for them.