



# Anxiety and difficulties attending school

## What is anxiety?

Anxiety is natural emotion and sometimes it is needed to help us be safe in certain situations

### Anxiety may look like these behaviours and emotions:

- Angry outburst
- Bad language
- Saying hurtful things
- Stubbornness and rigidity
- Confusion
- Being tearful
- Perfectionism
- Not wanting to do something
- Physical signs – feeling sick, tics, hair pulling, skin picking
- Selective mutism
- Wanting to stay in bed where it feels safe

## What might they be thinking?

Our children can face a huge mix of feelings during their day, especially at school with the prospect of dealing with expectations and worries surrounding:

- Coping at school
- Peers in school
- Eating and lunchtimes
- Being bullied or picked on
- New class
- Different teachers
- New routine
- Relationships
- Self-image/peer comparison
- Different friends
- Fitting in
- Making friends
- Different social expectations
- Change in teaching style
- Academic expectation and exams
- Embarrassment
- Uncomfortable uniform
- Getting older/ puberty/ adolescence



## What can you do to support your child?

### Listen

A difficult day at school may not look how you think. Children can show distress and anxiety in ways that can be quite challenging. Giving them that space to talk to you and just listening to them will help.

When you're in a rush, can you pause, acknowledge and arrange a time to talk with them?

#### Good ways to listen:

- In the car, when you're not looking at your child
- Over meals
- Bedtime

**Remember: you don't have to have a solution to what they tell you – just listening can be enough**

### Talk to your child

Acknowledge that it may be difficult; but you would like to know what they think and feel.

It is important that the adult does not dismiss any anxieties or worries they have; empathise with the young person.

## Home and school working together

Working together as a team – parents and carers with school - is key to understanding the signs of anxiety, having awareness of the child's whole day and what helps reduce anxiety.

### Regular communication is key.

Talk to school - explain the difficulties and ask what help is available for you and your child – a mentor or pastoral team member, time out space, enrichment clubs or social intervention groups, young carer groups (siblings).

It is worth noting that children and young people may be masking their anxiety in school and then letting it out at home – occasionally this happens the other way round too.

Work together to try and unpick what is making some things so difficult or overwhelming –e.g. is it a certain subject, a particular peer grouping?

## You are not alone

So many parents have similar experiences, challenges and worries of dealing with anxiety – and we know that when our children have any sort of additional need, this can be even harder.

### Talk to us

At SGPC we are all parent carers ourselves, so we understand how isolating it can be when our children are finding things tricky. We can signpost and support you.



## Difficulties attending school

Difficulties attending school has strong links with anxiety and key age groups –Y5 onwards and into teenage years in both girls and boys. There is a higher prevalence among autistic children.

You may hear different words used about your child or young person's non-attendance. The current terms used in South Glos are: Emotionally Based School-Avoidance (EBSA) or Emotionally Based Non-Attendance (EBNA).

Your child's non-attendance may start small with missing odd days or some lessons and escalate, or they may have been ill or run down and finding it difficult returning.

Once your child's attendance drops below 95% you may start to receive letters from school. It is helpful to know these are not personalised but are standard letters that schools have to send because of their statutory obligations regarding attendance.

## How can you help your child prepare at home?

**Build your toolkit.**

### Some strategies you can try include:

- Talk time
- Visual scales to communicate the intensity of feeling
- Breathing techniques – star or box breathing
- Grounding techniques – 5,4,3,2,1
- Journalling – writing or doodling
- Pursuing special interests for relaxation
- Routines
- Building in extra time to be supportively understanding
- Demand-free time after school to unwind – this may be on a screen



## What to think about when your child is struggling to attend school...

School professionals and parents working in partnership – no judgement – and building trust and support with the child at the centre is key.

Some areas and questions you could focus on include:

- The young person's strengths
- What is going well and not so well
- Relationships with peers and with adults
- Is there any bullying that needs to be addressed?
- Response to and engagement with academic tasks
- Have they noticed any distress/dysregulation and the cause?
- Has the staff member any ideas about how to help?
- How their non-attendance affects the family, e.g. work
- How the non-attendance affects and impacts any siblings
- Reasonable adjustments that can be put in place and the young person's response
- A plan on how to get them back in to school – phased/adjusted timings

## What is a reasonable adjustment?

Reasonable adjustments are changes that can be implemented for an individual child or group. This will depend on your child's needs and what school is able to provide, so these are best sought through discussions with school professionals on what is manageable, for example:

- Arriving earlier or later to avoid the busyness of start to school
- Doing independent work in a smaller class learning space
- Eating in a quieter, less sensory place
- Not attending all assemblies
- Leaving class a few minutes earlier to get to next lesson to avoid the changeover rush
- Going straight into lessons from breaks to settle before the rest of the class get in
- School uniform adjustments
- Having an older child as a buddy to help them at lunch and break times
- Building belonging (pull factor) role or responsibility, building self-esteem, confidence and thinking of school as a rewarding place to be
- Key phrases and scripts - ensure the same responses are being used at home and school
- Safe environment - clear, predictable, keeping things the same where possible with a warm friendly welcome and support for transitions
- Sensory adaptations - sensory analysis, sensory plan

## Understanding part time arrangements

In very exceptional circumstances, where it is in a pupil's best interests, a plan to help a child to attend school may involve the use of a temporary part-time timetable to meet their individual needs. Part-time timetables should be:

- Focused on the specific barrier to attendance in mind
- Time limited
- Regularly reviewed with the pupil and their parents/carers

They may mean full attendance at school, but for some tricky lessons to be spent in a hub or alternative space.

In agreeing to a part-time timetable, the school, parents/carers and pupil have agreed to the pupil being absent from school for part of the week or day, and therefore must treat absence as "absence with leave" (a type of authorised absence).

**A part-time timetable cannot be used to manage a pupil's behaviour.**

## Support professionals

**Key Adult/Person** – A safe person at school who knows your child well. They may meet and greet, have regular contact with home, advocate for child and support with interventions.

**School Nurse** – You can request the help from the school nursing service through a school referral to speak with your child and yourself and seek further advice and support

**Pastoral school interventions** – Some schools have an ELSA or Thrive trained member of staff who can provide talking and cognitive approaches with your child.

**Mental Health Schools' Team (run by Off the Record)** - This is available in some schools. <https://www.otrbristol.org.uk/what-we-do/mhst/>

**Primary Mental Health Support** – a service run by CAMHS which can give advice to schools in supporting mental health for individual students.

**Family Link Worker** – A new service started in January 2024 across South Glos to support families and schools with persistent attendance difficulties.

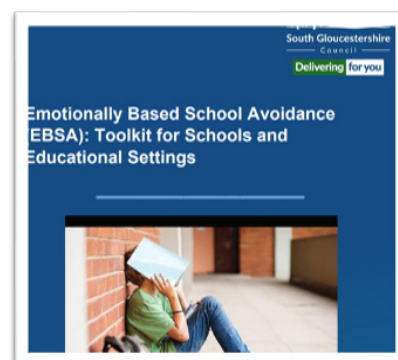
**Education Welfare Officer (EWO)** – They work for South Glos Council. If your child's attendance drops significantly below school target, the EWO may become involved and ask for a meeting with parents and school.



## The EBSA Toolkit - for school professionals

South Glos Council have created a toolkit to provide schools with the resources to enable earlier intervention and prevention of EBSA (Emotionally Based School Avoidance).

Visit our website to find out about the toolkit and how we have been involved to ensure the experiences and views of parent carers have been considered. Click [here](#) to read the story on our news page.



## Websites and apps that could help...

**Not Fine in School** - Parent-led organisation empowering families and raising awareness of school attendance barriers.  
[www.notfineinschool.co.uk](http://www.notfineinschool.co.uk)

**Young Minds** - for ages 0-25 (usually from 4). One-to-one support through telephone support helpline 0808 802 5544, email or a live webchat. Downloadable resources of information and practical tools.  
[www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk)

**Off the Record** - for children and young people aged 11-25. Offer drop-in sessions. One-to-one is also available; this has a wait time of around one year.  
[www.otrbristol.org.uk](http://www.otrbristol.org.uk)

**Kooth** - for 11-18. Support through a text service or online chat.  
[www.Kooth.com](http://www.Kooth.com)

### Apps:

- [Headspace for kids](#)
- [Chill Panda](#) -family friendly relaxation
- [Worry Tree](#)

## Stay in touch!

Sign up to our [mailing list](#) to receive weekly emails about our FREE workshops on a range of SEND themes and the latest SEND news and information.

**SGPC contact information for parent carers:**

Email: [360outreach@sglospc.org.uk](mailto:360outreach@sglospc.org.uk) or [support@sglospc.org.uk](mailto:support@sglospc.org.uk)

Website: [www.sgpc.org.uk](http://www.sgpc.org.uk)



Don't forget, you can reach out to other parent carers in our **SGPC Facebook community** for advice