My child will not go to school – what should I do?

What is Emotionally Based School Absence (EBSA)?

EBSA, also sometimes referred to as school anxiety, school phobia, school refusal or school avoidant, is when a child or young person experiences anxiety and distress relating to attending school. They completely refuse to go to school; they may complain of a headache, nausea, tummy pains, generally not feeling well and they may have a physical outburst or tantrum to reinforce their refusal to go to school. In some cases, they may threaten to hurt themselves.

Children and young people may quickly learn what makes their parents/carers stop encouraging them to go to school and let them stay at home and this may become their go-to reaction to the suggestion of going to school.

Why does it happen?

EBSA can happen for several reasons, and it is important to try and figure out why your child or young person is refusing to go to school as soon as possible – the longer they refuse to go to school, the harder it is for them to go back and the bigger the impact on your whole family. Some reasons for school refusal include:

- General anxiety about being around lots of people
- Separation anxiety – fear of being separated from parents or other close carers
- Friendship issues or problems within a peer group
- An incident with a teacher or member of school staff
- Academic pressures, finding the work hard and not feeling they can ask for help
- Bullying
- Struggling with unstructured break times during the school day
- Significant life changes
- Adolescent hormones
- Trauma or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- Classroom disruptions, changes to timetable, staff or classmates

In some cases, where there is a history or diagnosis of anxiety, the issues can seem more significant and be harder for the child or young person to overcome. Where there is no history of anxiety or school refusal and this comes on suddenly and unexpectedly, there may be an identifiable reason for it, i.e. a specific incident that with support could be resolved.

What can you do?

It is important to address this issue as soon as possible – the longer it goes on, the harder it will be to resolve and the more likely your child or young person is to want to stay at home.

Talk to your child or young person and their school to see if there has been a specific incident that has caused their school refusal.
You may wish to contact your GP to see if they may be able help. If the GP (or any medical/mental health professional) feels that your child is not currently fit to attend school,

ask for a letter to the local authority (LA) to be provided, explaining this. Evidence of this type would provide a documented explanation for the child's non-attendance.

You may wish to contact Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) via their online referral form – CAMHS CPE referral form or by calling **0300 365 1234** (Monday-Friday, 9 am-5 pm)

You may wish to ask for the local authority for support, please see the following link for more information:
https://www.wokingham.gov.uk/children-families-and-young-people/children-and-families/family-support/ask-family-support

You may also wish to reach out to the Educational Welfare Team to see if they can offer you any support and guidance:
https://wsh.wokingham.gov.uk/learning-and-teaching-support/education-welfare-service-including-child-employment

Here is a link to the to the Children's Commissioner guide to parents about school attendance which you may find helpful:
Resources for families | Children's Commissioner for England

As your child has an EHC plan, you may wish to consider asking for an early review of the EHC plan or a re-assessment of needs, especially if your child's mental health needs have arisen relatively recently and are not covered in the plan.

Don't give up and don't ignore the problem – it is not likely to go away on its own and avoidance is not going to solve anything.

Top tips

Never give up

Be understanding of how your child or young person feels but remain positive and firm; make sure they know that you want and expect them to go to school. If your child or young person thinks that they have control over the situation then they may use this and learn which of your buttons to press so that you give up making them to go to school. Remember that unless you have chosen to home educate your child or young person, ***school is compulsory not optional,*** but if you stop encouraging your child or young person to go to school, they may start to think that you see school as something they don't have to do. It is better to be 2, 3 or even 4 hours late to school than not to go at all.

Don't avoid the situation

It is unlikely to go away on its own, so pretending that there isn't a problem is only delaying the situation. There will come a time when you want your child or young person to go back to school because their refusal is likely to have an increasing impact on your life and theirs, and the longer they have been off school the harder it will be to break that cycle. Keep talking to your child or young person, talk daily to the school and seek other advice if necessary.

Some of the things to consider with school include:

- Time out card
- Mentor/buddy
- Social skills groups or individual support
- Slightly later start and/or earlier finish to the school day (avoiding the rush and crowds)
- Check ins throughout the day – these can be very discreet and are sometime called "light touch"

- Safe place
- Named staff member to go to if there is a problem
- Break/lunch time groups
- Restorative work if there has been an incident with a specific person (pupil or staff)
- Reduced timetable for a short, agreed period to help reintegration
- Referral to school counsellor (if they have one), Primary Mental Health, CAMHS or the Educational Psychologist
- If your child has an Education Health and Care Plan suggest an early Annual Review

Try to focus on positives

Ask your child or young person to think of the top 3 or 5 things that makes a good school day and then ask the top 3 or 5 things that make for a tricky school day; this may help you to understand some of the things they are finding hard and may also enable you to help your child or young person to find solutions to some of the problems.

Maintain a school day routine

If your child or young person is at home you should make their daily routine as similar to a school day routine as possible; up and dressed at the same time as they would if they were going to school, breakfast and then do something positive and productive (educationally based if possible – BBC Bitesize or reading for example) with a break and lunch at the same time as they would if they were at school. Do not allow your child or young person access to any electronics or TV during school hours, they should also not be allowed to go out (unless it is to go to school).

Seek appropriate advice

If your child or young person is displaying behaviours or making comments that concern you (particularly if they are withdrawing from other social and family activities), seek advice from your GP or, if you have one, your CAMHS Worker. If you feel that you need some support and your child or young person has Special Educational Needs (SEN) then Wokingham SENDIASS may be able to help you. If your child or young person has an EHC plan, then you should let your Casework Pacitioner know what is going on. Under section 19 of the Education Act, the local authority has a legal duty to secure suitable, full-time alternative education for those children of compulsory school age who, by reason of illness, exclusion or otherwise, may not for any period receive suitable education unless such arrangements are made for them (section 19, Education Act 1996). Here is a link IPSEA's guidance on this for your information https://www.ipsea.org.uk/getting-temporary-education-put-in-place

www.sendiasswokingham.org.uk

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