

Section 1: Introduction

Is EBSA 'new'?

You will often hear adults saying that in 'their' day, everyone just went to school and there was no school refusal or EBSA! There is evidence in the literature that this is not true. As long ago as 1932, Broadwin defined a special kind of truancy where the child wanted to go to school but was unable for emotional reasons. So EBSA isn't new. However, we do seem to have increased EBSA especially post the COVID-19 pandemic. The next section will look at some global/lifestyle events that might be influencing this rise in EBSA.

Setting the Scene-The impact of world events & lifestyle

We do not live in a bubble and, one way or another, our daily lives are affected by what is happening in the world at large, by media coverage of world events, and how these events impact on our daily lives. Over the past number of years, we have been living through the global Covid-19 pandemic. More recently, the war in Ukraine has captured our attention and the fallout from the conflict is beginning to have real implications for our country, our economy and our education system. As we move into the future, the global climate crisis looms on the horizon, and no doubt, there will be other crises to navigate. Events such as these are unsettling, upsetting and anxiety provoking. Changes in parenting style, the online world, technology addiction and increasingly busy lives create stress for us all. These layers of external factors may interact with pre-existing personal, familial, and/or school factors and lead to a child or young person presenting with EBSA.

The Covid-19 pandemic is of particular relevance to students with EBSA. Prior to school closures due to the pandemic, a number of students were already experiencing attendance difficulties. Some were at home. Some were on a reduced or reintegration timetable. Some were starting to display avoidance behaviour. EBSA behaviour can be maintained by periods of absence, due to the impact of isolation on relationships and friendships, or fear of being behind with schoolwork, decreased motivation to attend, and anxiety related to these factors.

Anecdotal evidence from those working in schools indicates that many students who presented with EBSA prior to the pandemic were happy about school closures. They were content to be at home with their families, safe in the knowledge that they did not have to go to school. As school closures continued, these students got used to being at home and it became their new routine. Some engaged well with online learning, while others did not. Over time however, lack of face-to-face contact with others in the school community led to feelings of isolation and a loss of skills as to how to interact socially with others. Despite school efforts, those with learning difficulties fell further behind with schoolwork and their awareness of the growing gap between themselves and their peers contributed

to their unease about returning to school. In addition, for some anxious students (and parents) there were fears about catching the virus and unease about wearing masks in school. In the context of children and young people with EBSA, these factors have served to increase their levels of anxiety and decrease their motivation to return to school even with supportive school systems in place.

The war in Ukraine has also impacted on some children. Talk and images of war are upsetting. They threaten our view of the world as a safe and predictable place. For children and young people, they can cause different reactions, with some more affected than others. Vulnerable groups may include children and young people of Ukrainian and Russian heritage as well as others who are seeking protection in Ireland (asylum seekers and refugees, displaced people), those who have experienced separation and loss; those with pre-existing risk factors; and finally those with additional needs. Students with EBSA could be considered in either of the last two categories. As many students with EBSA are anxious, the impact of this war, following swiftly in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, may serve to further increase their sense of fear.

At a global level over the past number of years, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has been issuing repeated warnings about the threat of human-induced climate change. Talk and occurrence of catastrophic weather events and natural disasters has become more commonplace and frequent. Storm warnings can impact on education. Indeed many of these weather events have led to school closures.

Nationally, we now have lots of conversations about the cost of living “crisis”. There has also been a change in parenting style in many families. Technology addiction is on the rise. All these events can have an impact on the ability of CYP to manage anxiety.



Mental Health and EBSA

Not wanting to attend school is not a mental health issue of itself and for many CYP, support from their parents and schools is enough to help them overcome their problems attending school.

Nervousness or worries can be an issue for some CYP in relation to school attendance but this does not mean they have a mental illness and need input from a Consultant Psychiatrist. The CYP who is having problems managing their worries may require supports but this may be obtained from their home/schools/community services. Most of the time there is a reason in relation to non-attendance, therefore it is vital to explore with the child all areas of their life- this may be in the context of family circumstances; significant life events; learning difficulties; friendships/relationships; sensory needs; social and communication skills; hearing/sight issues; maturity. Exploring the reason for the young person's concerns/worries is vital, followed by the correct intervention. Also, ensure basic lifestyle habits are implemented by parent(s)/carer, such as:

- Sleep hygiene.
- Healthy balanced diet/Omega 3 supplements. Avoid caffeine.
- Exercise regularly.
- Take part in meaningful activity/ Limiting screen time.
- Family time- play board games/ games that require concentration- train the brain.
- Meditation- benefits to aid concentration skills.

How can adults support children and young people?

There are many aspects to a child's life, and while working with children, we all have one thing in common - the child is the main priority. Therefore, it is necessary for all to work collaboratively to ensure best outcomes for the child, empowering them, embracing differences, and fostering their uniqueness.

During difficult times, when children and young people's sense of safety is threatened, a secure and trusted relationship with key adults will help them to process and manage their thoughts and feelings. At a general level, adults can support children and young people during such times by using five key principles. These are the promotion of safety, calm, belonging and connectedness, self- and community-efficacy, and hope (Hobfoll et al., 2007).

At a practical level, parents/ guardians can support children and young people in the following ways:

- Model a sense of calm
- Tend to your own wellbeing needs
- Maintain routines
- Limit media exposure

- Monitor vulnerable groups
- Foster a sense of control-encourage students to think of small ways to help
- Give information in reassuring ways – children and young people will have different understandings of what is going on, and without the facts, they often imagine situations far worse than reality. They need factual, age-appropriate information. Let their questions and their age guide you as to how much information to provide. Very young children need brief, simple information and reassurance that they are safe and that the people they care about are safe. Older children may need help to separate reality from rumour and fantasy. Having the facts can help them feel a sense of control. They may also be concerned with their mortality, fairness and moral and/or ethical issues. Give them space and opportunity to discuss these in a supportive and safe way. Be aware of what you are saying if talking to other adults about the war in the company of children and young people.

Further Reading

See www.gov.ie/en/publication/48639-information-for-schools-ukraine/ for more advice, including:

Supporting the Wellbeing of Children from Ukraine in your School

The Response to Stress Information for School Staff Primary and Post Primary