

## Section 2: Background

### What is EBSA?

Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) is a broad umbrella term used to describe a group of children and young people who have severe difficulty in attending school due to emotional factors, often resulting in prolonged absences from school (West Sussex County Council, 2022).

### What is reluctant attendance and school avoidance behaviour?

This refers to avoidance attending school or difficulties remaining in school for an entire day. It can result in a student missing school for lengthy periods of time or missing specific classes or particular times of the day. It can involve challenging behaviours in the morning as the child or young person attempts to miss school. This avoidance behaviour can range from mild sporadic difficulties with school attendance to severe and persistent difficulties that require collaboration with the family/ carers and multi-agency input (NEPS, 2020).

### Why does EBSA happen?

There is no single cause for EBSA and there are likely to be various contributing factors for why a child may be finding it difficult to attend school. It is well recognised in the research literature that several complex and interlinked factors often underpins EBSA, including the child, the family and school environment (Baker & Bishop, 2015). Kearney and Spear (2012) found four main reasons for EBSA:

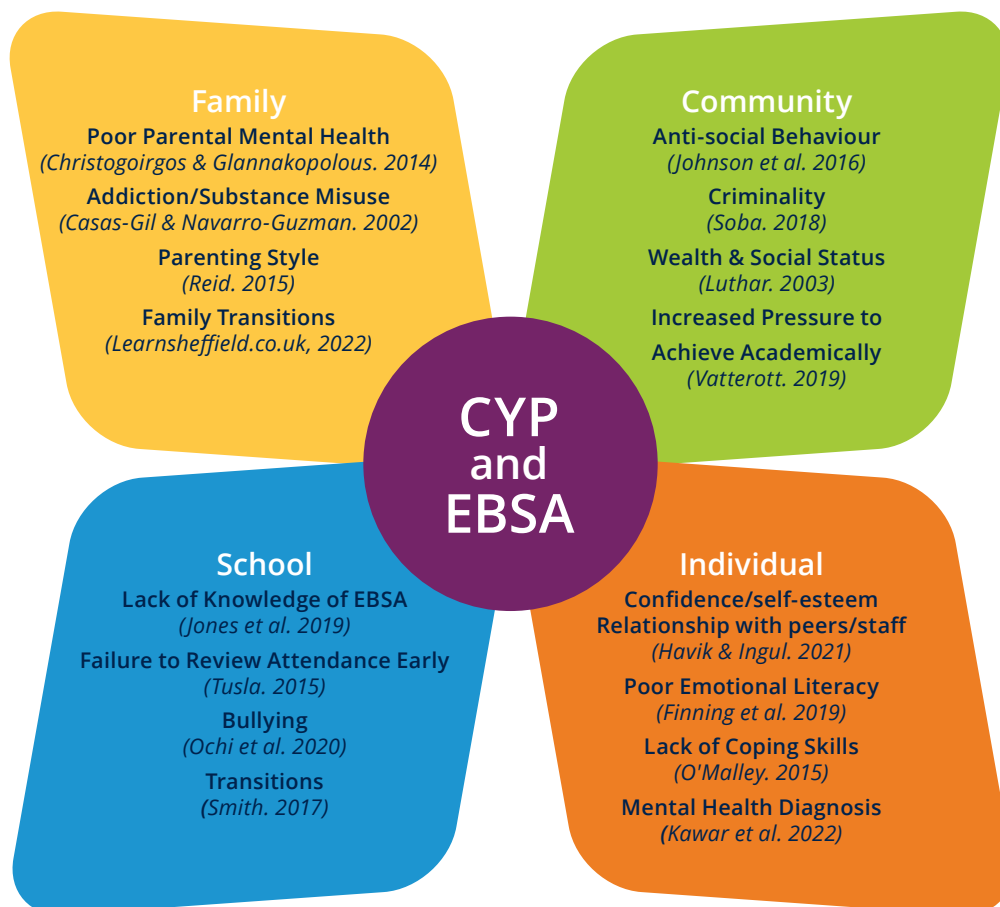
1. To **avoid** negative feelings provoked by school-related stimuli.
2. To **escape** from social aversion and evaluation, often to avoid being rejected or disliked.
3. To **gain attention** from significant others, e.g., parents.
4. To **seek tangible reinforcers outside of the school setting**, such as going shopping or playing computer games during school time.

According to this model, the avoidance of uncomfortable feelings or situations described in the first two points could be viewed as negatively reinforcing the EBSA, whereas in the second two points, the EBSA could be seen as positively reinforced by factors outside of school (Kearney & Spear, 2012).

## Possible Causes of EBSA

The possible causes of EBSA are demonstrated in the diagram below. Each young person experiencing EBSA is a unique individual and may experience challenges under one or more of the headings below.

Figure 1: Possible Causes of EBSA



## What protective factors can prevent EBSA?

Just as there are risk factors for young people experiencing EBSA, there are also protective factors that prevent or reduce the possibility of EBSA occurring.

Sector	Essential Elements
Community	<p>Safety of neighbourhood</p> <p>Availability/adequacy of health and other services</p> <p>Availability of jobs (Kearney, 2008; Maynard et al., 2015)</p>
School	<p>Trauma Informed: A trauma informed school recognises and responds to the signs, symptoms, and risks of trauma to better understand students who have had adverse childhood experiences (ACES) (Devenney &amp; O Toole, 2021)</p> <p>Pastoral care teams (Best, 2014)</p> <p>Key adult (Gristy, 2012; Bomber, 2008)</p> <p>Enforcement of anti-bullying strategies</p> <p>Collaboration with parents (Tusla, 2015)</p>
Family	<p>Development of parenting skills and understanding (Tremblay, 2015)</p> <p>Partnership with schools (Oostdam &amp; Hooge, 2012)</p> <p>Participating in support groups for EBSA (Arky, 2021)</p>
Individual	<p>Confidence and self-esteem (Jami &amp; Aqeel, 2016)</p> <p>Positive relationship with peers/staff (Gristy, 2012)</p> <p>Emotional Literacy: Having self-awareness, recognising your own feelings and how to manage them (Cook et al., 2017)</p> <p>Good level of Coping Skills (Freire et al., 2020)</p>

## How does EBSA start?

The following diagrams illustrate the thought process and cycles that can lead to a student's growing reluctance to attend school. This in turn can develop into total school avoidance if interventions do not break the cycle.

*Figure 1: Possible Causes of EBSA*



Source: Wicklow School Refusal Pack

## Initial Signs of EBSA

- Frequent tearfulness/ distress/ pains in tummy or headaches on Sunday nights or Monday mornings
- Bedwetting/signs of distress/upset on Sunday nights at the thoughts of going back to school.
- Distress or saying they feel sick after a break (e.g., long weekend or school holidays)
- A pattern of the young person frequently asking the teacher to ring his/her parent from school/wanting to go home/saying that they are feeling sick.
- Young person being challenging/having tantrums at the mention of going to school, or before school in the morning.
- Prolonged difficulties (anxieties) for a young person when mixing with others (e.g., going outside to play with other children, going to after school activities, parties etc.)
- Pre-occupation with being organised for school – overly perfectionistic.
- A family stressor (e.g., parental separation or bereavement) can trigger some anxious behaviours/feelings about leaving home or leaving a parent in order to attend school. This is normal.

### Adolescents may also show the following behaviours;

- Worry or fear related to school
- Sleeping difficulties and fatigue
- Change of mood, negativity towards school, subjects or teachers
- Increased self-consciousness
- Lack of engagement with school activities, outings, trips
- Poor sense of school belonging

(Extracted from Wicklow School Refusal Pack)

## Further Reading

Christopher Kearney is a leading author in this area based in the USA. His books contain a lot of theory and practical ideas. *“Helping School Refusing Children and their Parents: A Guide for School-Based Professionals”* (2nd ed.) and *“When Children Refuse School”* are two of his most recent books.