School Anxiety And Distress

Parent Support For Anxiety based School Avoidance

Developed in partnership with parents and professionals

Children in Northern Ireland

Understanding School Anxiety Or Anxiety Based School Avoidance

Emotional or Anxiety-Based School Avoidance, commonly referred to as EBSA or ABSA, refers to a pattern where pupils are unable to attend school due to emotional distress or anxiety. Symptoms may include physical complaints and responses (headaches, stomach pains), changes in behaviour, avoidance of specific classes, environments or social interactions, and lead to frequent unexplained absences.

There is no single cause for this school avoidance, and it is likely that there are various contributing factors. These factors may include family problems, academic struggles or mental health issues. Or it could be as simple as preferring to be home and playing on their devices. Home is their safe space with fewer demands than the school environment. Identifying why a child doesn't want to attend school can be particularly challenging. It is important to note that the reasons are not mutually exclusive and may overlap. Additionally, it is crucial to understand that this is a complex issue and needs to be taken seriously. It really isn't just that a child is being awkward or defiant. They really can't help how they are feeling.

Early detection

Most schools in Northern Ireland use systems to track attendance patterns, paying special attention to frequent or sporadic absences that may signal emotional or anxiety-driven avoidance. By recognising these patterns early, educators can begin exploring potential causes and intervene before the problem becomes more severe. However, it is also important to try and identify school anxiety and distress before patterns of absence occur, which is why good collaboration between schools, parents and carers is very important.

Establishing open, nonjudgmental communication channels allows schools and families to work together in understanding and addressing the underlying issues. Parents and carers often observe behaviours and stressors at home that are crucial in understanding the full scope of a child's anxiety. Regular contact with the school provides an opportunity for collaborative thinking and early action.

Signs and Symptoms

It is also important to highlight that responses to emotional dysregulation vary from individual to individual, often described or explained as fight/flight/freeze or fawn, and so it is also crucial to track changes in behaviour.

Here are some of the common symptoms:

Physical Symptoms

- Headaches, stomach pains, nausea, fatigue, or dizziness, especially in the morning and specifically on school days;
- Shortness of breath, racing heart, sweating, or shaking may accompany the anticipation of attending school.

Behavioural Symptoms

- Refusal or reluctance to go to school;
- Frequent absences, or requests to leave early;
- Increased dependence on parents and carers, clinginess, or separation anxiety;
- Avoidance of specific classes, subjects, or activities.

Emotional Symptoms

- Intense worry or fear;
- Irritability or mood swings, including heightened emotions;
- Low self-esteem, feelings of inadequacy, or fear of failure.

Academic and Social Withdrawal

- Decline in academic performance and disengagement from studies;
- Isolation from peers, and avoiding participation in activities or interacting with friends.
- Sometimes children and young people struggling in class can be misinterpreted as deliberately behaving badly when actually there are other factors involved.

Tips for Parents

Risk Factors for Anxiety Based School Avoidance

As always, events that lead to ABSA will differ depending on each child's unique characteristics, circumstances, and experiences. However, certain factors can be associated with vulnerability and potential triggers can be grouped as shown below:

School

- Transitions to a new school, secondary school or into a new Key Stage
- Academic demands and pressures
- Journey to school
- Exams and tests
- Social pressures between peers
- Difficulty with a certain subjects

Family

- Being the youngest child in your family
- Overprotective parenting style
- Being a young carer
- Loss or Bereavement
- Separation or divorce
- Parents with health issues
- Families experiencing difficulties or high-stress levels

The child

- Separation anxiety from parent
- Low self-esteem/ low confidence
- Personality traits including reluctance to interact or withdrawal from others and/or settings
- Learning difficulties
- Traumatic events
- Physical Illness
- Key ages relating to the school transition phases

Frequently, the absence from school is the result of a combination of various factors. Attempting to pinpoint a single cause can lead to the unfair blaming of individuals, causing them to feel anxious and defensive.

Interventions and Strategies for Anxiety Based School Avoidance

Research suggests that early intervention is more likely to produce successful outcomes.

The longer a child stays off school or out of classes the harder the re-entry will be. Do remind them of the importance of school, without applying so much pressure. Each day is a new day.

One strategy many parents' resort to is to make home boring! No computers, games, phones etc if they aren't at school. If your child is saying they feel sick, bed rest is a must and obviously no after-school activities or friends over. It sounds so harsh, but this will be a push factor from home to encourage them to go back to school. Your child will take advantage of any hesitation or uncertainty you show.

Try to focus on asking positive questions too like, what are the best things about school as well as what are you most worried about? If they can't tell you ask them to write it down or even draw it depending on their age. Consistency is the key so ensuring that home and schoolwork together on their approach is essential.

Be prepared for bumpy times after a school holiday, a period of illness or even the weekend

Some of the strategies that parents can use to support their child at home include:

A Predictable Routine

A stable daily routine provides structure and reduces uncertainty, which can help children and young people feel more secure.

Open Communication

Creating a safe space for children to express their feelings without fear of judgment, while actively listening, can validate their emotions and form part of their coping mechanisms.

Model Calm Responses

Demonstrating calm and positive coping mechanisms when dealing with stress or challenging situations also sets a powerful example for children and young people.

Relaxation Strategies

Teaching children relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, mindfulness, or visualisation can help them manage anxiety.

Realistic Expectations

Focusing on small, achievable goals and celebrating progress, however small can boost confidence and build momentum.

Collaborating with School

Working closely with the school, actively participating in meetings with teachers, or other staff to stay informed and ensure the child's needs are addressed. Offering information about the child's strengths, triggers, and coping strategies to help the school create an effective support plan.

Promoting Resilience

Reinforcing the idea that mistakes are opportunities for learning and that setbacks are part of the process. Encouraging friendships and social activities outside of school to provide emotional support and reduce isolation. Reminding the child of their talents and successes to boost their confidence and resilience.

Focus on Connection

• Focus on helping them feel understood and supported first.

Seek Emotional Support

• Connect with other parents who have experienced similar challenges through support groups or forums.

Specialist Advice

Schools often act as a bridge or can point families to the support services they need.

• Schools routinely recommend evaluations by educational psychologists to assess the child's specific needs and guide interventions.

• Teachers often work closely with the school's SENCO to ensure the child's needs are documented and accommodated in their education plan.

• Schools regularly share information about local organisations, peer support groups, and resources for parents navigating SEND services. Independent advice is available from organisations such as the Children's Law Centre and the Special Educational Needs Advice Centre.

• Schools engaged in best practice also encourage parents to seek advice from child psychologists, therapists, and or paediatricians who can offer tailored strategies to manage anxiety.
• Maintain clear communication with school during periods of non-attendance. This collaborative approach ensures that every child receives the care and support needed to thrive.

- RESOURCES -

Advice and Support for Parents and Carers

Parentline NI
- https://www.ci-ni.org.uk/parentline/

Parenting Focus
- https://www.parentingfocus.org/

Carers NI
- https://www.carersuk.org/ni

Fostering Network
- https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/about/about-us/our-work-in-northern-ireland

CYPSP Youth Wellness Web
- https://cypsp.hscni.net/youth-wellness-web/

Autism and Anxiety

NHS, Leicestershire Partnership, Understanding why an autistic child may struggle to attend school
- https://www.spectrumgaming.net/post/introduction-to-autism-anxiety

Spectrum Gaming, Introduction to Autism and Anxiety
- https://www.spectrumgaming.net/post/introduction-to-autism-anxiety

Autism NI, Anxiety Resource Pack
- https://autismni.org/assets/general/files/anxiety-resource-pack-2024-PDF.pdf

Childline
https://www.childline.org.uk/

Education Welfare Service
https://www.eani.org.uk/services/educationwelfare-service

Emergency Mental Health Support Samaritans
- https://autismni.org/assets/general/files/anxiety-resource-pack-2024-PDF.pdf

Lifeline
- https://www.lifelinehelpline.info/

Information on Emotionally-based School Avoidance for Parents and Carers West Sussex County Council (Educational Psychology Service), Information for Parents
- https://schools.westsussex.gov.uk/Page/10483

One-to-one Therapeutic Support for Children and Young People in NI Strive NI
- https://striveni.co.uk/

Peace of Mind NI
- http://peaceofmindni.com/

Relate NI
- https://www.relateni.org/

Mindwise
- https://www.mindwisenv.org/what-we-do/mindwise-services/children-and-families/

Action Mental Health
- https://www.amh.org.uk/

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