

# Orchard Primary School Well-being Newsletter

## Supporting the Emotional Well-being and Mental Health of Our School Community

Summer Term - 2023

At Orchard, we are committed to supporting children, staff and parents in their wellbeing and mental health. We know that wellbeing, physical and mental health are all vital to successful learning.

This term's Mental Health and Well-being newsletter focuses on Emotionally Based School Avoidance (previously known as 'School Refusal').

### Did you know?

Emotional Based School Avoidance (EBSA), also known as Anxiety-Based School Avoidance (ABSA), is a term used to describe children and young people (CYP) who experience persistent challenges in attending school due to negative feelings, such as anxiety.

It's now called Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) rather than 'school refusal' because 'school refusal' makes it sound like it is the child's *choice* not to attend.

In reality however, EBSA is actually associated with emotional and physical distress. In short, it's when difficulties attending school have escalated to a point where the CYP has *continued* to struggle to attend school over a period of time.



### Exploring Reasons

There are lots of possible reasons for a child's level of anxiety to build to the point that they don't feel able to go to school.

Undoubtedly, the pandemic has had an impact on some children's ability to separate from their main care giver. However, other reasons might be to do with the school environment - perhaps it's related to SEND, or social challenges in school. Or, it might be because of family breakdown, or bereavement.

There are many factors involved in Emotionally Based School Avoidance, which can be referred to as 'push and pull factors'. Push factors increase a CYP's ability to attend school, and pull factors are those that reduce it (and therefore make it more likely the CYP will stay at home). E.g.

#### Environmental. Push factors – towards school

- Parent working so can't stay at home (includes financial pressures - cannot stay at home with child)
- Peers attending school
- Good social networks
- Good routines, sleep etc.

#### Pull factors – away from school

- Parental illness
- Liking safety/ flexibility of routine at home
- Liking of toys at home
- Less sensory stimulation/ noise at home

#### School. Push factors = towards school

- Friendly and welcoming staff who show understanding and care towards child (and parent)
- Good relationship with teachers and peers
- Needs identified and met
- Sense of belonging
- Once *in* school, they are happy and settled – they are motivated and are learning

#### Pull factors = away from school

- Unmet need – learning, social, emotional, sensory
- Friendship difficulties or bullying
- Unrealistic expectations and pressure of learning
- Dislike competitive element of school
- Relationship breakdown with teacher
- Dislike of certain lessons e.g. P.E, Swimming, Maths, Spelling

### Within themselves. Push factors = towards school

- Good awareness of feelings and triggers and how to calm themselves when starting to feel anxious
- Aware of ANTS (Automatic Negative Thoughts) and how to look at an alternative way of seeing things
- Motivated to attend school and achieve well for future goals

### Pull factors = away from school

- Self-awareness and self-regulation skills undeveloped
- Negative thought cycles
- Not motivated to go to school – Doesn't see it as important
- Sensory challenges

As parents/carers, we also have our own push and pull factors. We may not be aware of these, but they will impact on our resilience and ability to encourage and coach our child into school. However, you should never feel that it's your fault. You should never feel embarrassed if you are struggling to get your child into school.

### **Anxiety**

The most common way of managing anxiety is avoidance.

When we avoid the anxious situation, we get an immediate relief. However, this is only a short-term solution as when we face the situation the next time the anxiety reaction is much greater due to the increased anticipation of the event. This happens in EBSA. CYP who are anxious about attending school get an immediate sense of relief when they avoid school, however the fear of attending the next day is then much greater. They are then even more likely to avoid school again. This is called an avoidance cycle.

Instead of using avoidance to cope with feeling overwhelmed, we need to support our CYP to:

- Recognise the triggers of their anxiety
- Identify small steps they feel they can take
- Have ways they can calm themselves when they are starting to feel anxious.

This will help them deal with stressful situations throughout life and not become overwhelmed or avoid the things they find challenging.

Remember also that anxiety can make people behave in different ways, for example...

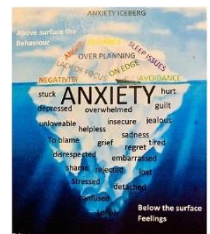
- A desire to control people and events.
- Difficulty getting to sleep.
- Feeling agitated or angry.
- Defiance and other challenging behaviours.
- Having high expectations for self, including schoolwork & sports.
- Avoiding activities or events (including school).
- Pain like stomach-aches and headaches.
- Struggling to pay attention and focus.
- Intolerance of uncertainty.
- Crying and difficulty managing emotions.
- Over planning for situations and events.
- Feeling worried about situations or events.

### **The Anxiety Iceberg**

Sometimes however, the child simply can't express why they are anxious.

Young Minds recommend drawing an 'anxiety iceberg' with them. Here's a video explaining how:

<https://youtu.be/s51qvDmJ9I>



### **Personalised Plan**

Working with school, we can form a plan of what can be adapted to reduce some of the anxiety.

The stress hormone cortisol is often higher in the morning (to help get us out of bed!), however this can make feelings of anxiety worse in the mornings. It can therefore be helpful to focus on morning routines to start with - maybe arriving 10 minutes early to do a special 'job' or chat with a special 'mentor' in the Bubble Room. This also provides them with a 'safe space' in the school – a quiet area away from a bustling classroom first thing. Alternatively, pupils who are anxious about separation are welcome to join Breakfast Club 10 minutes early, arriving via the front entrance. It might be that it is beneficial for a child to start the school day a little later, arriving after the main drop off.

We can work with the young person's strengths and areas of interest and resilience – drawing on past successes and positive relationships. For example, if a young person loves sport, we can arrange for each morning to begin with 10 minutes of basketball, football etc. with a 'buddy' and mentor before they join in with the main learning task. Please do get in touch if there's anything we can do to help.