Emotionally Based School Avoidance Resource

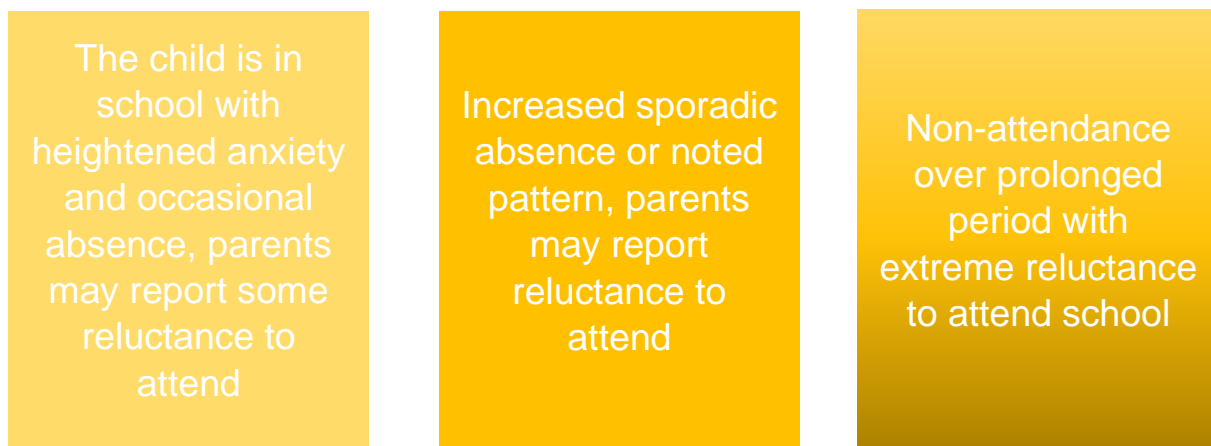# Bolton Educational Psychology Service

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What is emotionally based school avoidance?

What is Emotionally Based School Avoidance?

Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) is a broad umbrella term used to describe pupils who have severe difficulty in attending school due to emotional factors, often resulting in prolonged absences from school. UK literature reports that around 1-2% of children and young people are absent from school due to emotional reasons, with a slightly higher prevalence amongst secondary school students (Elliot, 1999; Guilliford & Miller, 2015). Outcomes for children and young people include poor academic attainment, reduced social opportunities, limited employment opportunities and poor adult mental health (Pellegrini, 2007; Taylor, 2012; Walter et al., 2010).

Thambirajah et al. (2008) refer to a spectrum of school non-attendance behaviour ranging from occasional to persistent absence to help us to understand the pattern and severity of emotionally based school avoidance.

The child is in school with heightened anxiety and occasional absence, parents may report some reluctance to attend

Increased sporadic absence or noted pattern, parents may report reluctance to attend

Non-attendance over prolonged period with extreme reluctance to attend school

Avoidance or Refusal?

A clear distinction is made between pupils who are absent from school due to truanting and those who are absent due to the specific emotional distress that they experience around attending school (Thambirajah, Grandison & De-hayes, 2008). The terminology 'refuser' could be misleading as it implies that the child or young person has control over the school non-attendance. This is problematic as it implies the 'problem' is within the pupil themselves and detracts from acknowledging environmental factors that could be important in supporting a child or young person back to school.
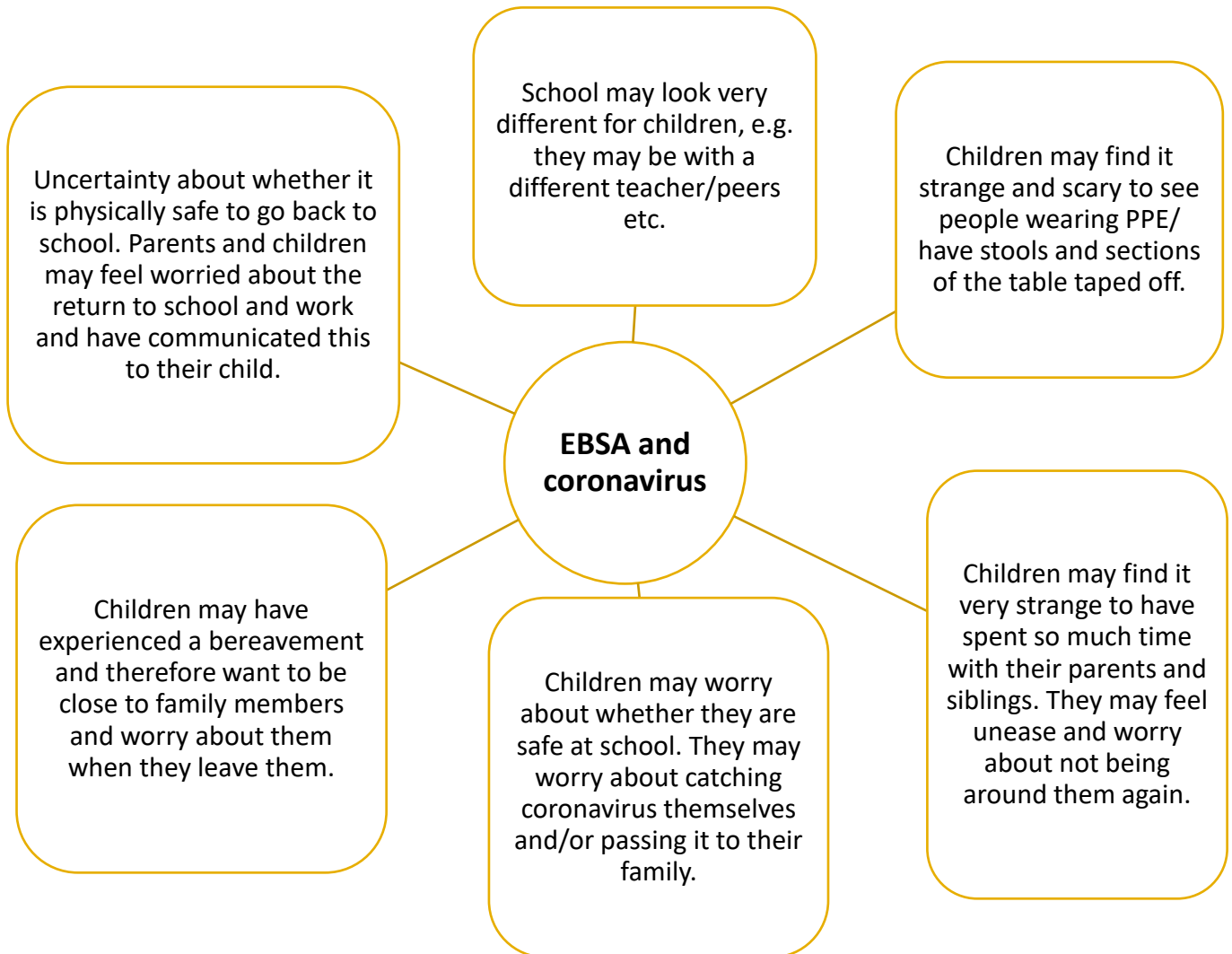
What are the emotional reasons why children avoid going to school?

EBSA is often underpinned by several complex and interlinked factors including the pupil, the family and the school environment (Thambirajah et al., 2008). Although there is no single cause for EBSA, research suggests that there tends to be four main reasons for school avoidance (Kearney and Silberman, 1990):

1. To avoid uncomfortable feelings brought on by attending school, *e.g. feelings of anxiety and/or low mood.*

2. To avoid situations that may be stressful *e.g. academic demands, social pressures and/ or aspects of the school environment (environmental busyness, etc).*

3. To reduce separation anxiety, or to gain attention from significant others e.g. parents or other family members.

4. To pursue tangible reinforces outside of schools *e.g. going shopping, playing computer games during school periods.*

How might emotionally based school avoidance be increased in the context of coronavirus?

EBSA and coronavirus

Uncertainty about whether it is physically safe to go back to school. Parents and children may feel worried about the return to school and work and have communicated this to their child.

School may look very different for children, e.g. they may be with a different teacher/peers etc.

Children may find it strange and scary to see people wearing PPE/ have stools and sections of the table taped off.

Children may have experienced a bereavement and therefore want to be close to family members and worry about them when they leave them.

Children may worry about whether they are safe at school. They may worry about catching coronavirus themselves and/or passing it to their family.

Children may find it very strange to have spent so much time with their parents and siblings. They may feel unease and worry about not being around them again.
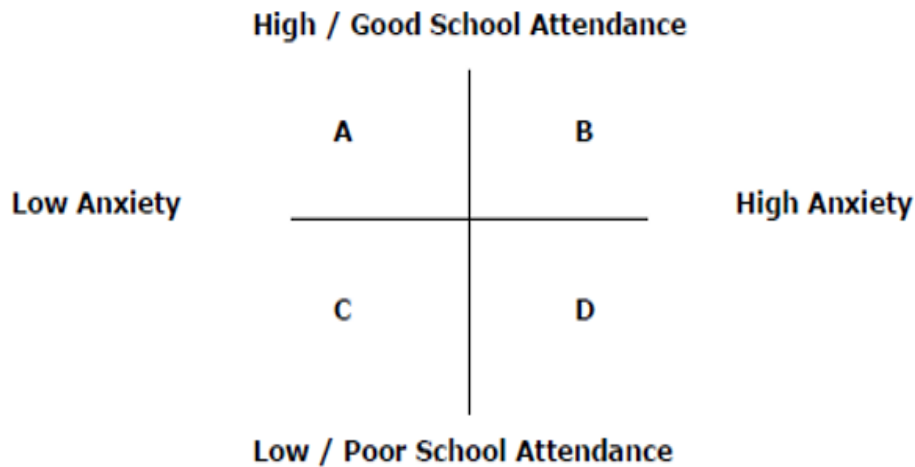
What can we do?

- Send information home that parents/carers can share with their children about what to expect when they come back to school.
- Make the school day as predictable and organised as possible.
- Promote shared joy and games and activities to re-connect peers.
- Give messages of safety.
- Ask parents and carers to give messages of reassurance and consider giving anxious children the opportunity to call home if needed.
- A transitional object might help. In the current circumstance this can't be something from home. One example could be a 'hug button' – draw a small heart on your child's and your own hand. If the child is feeling sad or misses you while at school they can press the hug button and it will send them a 'virtual' hug.

How to use this document

High / Good School Attendance

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                    A              B

Low Anxiety       ────────┼────────      High Anxiety

                    C              D
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Low / Poor School Attendance

Section 1: Whole school approaches (Pupils in categories A and B)

Children and young people within the A and B categories are pupils who experience low to high anxiety but who are able to return and remain in school. The use of preventative approaches and strategies to reduce anxiety in the classroom can be used to support these pupils.

Section 2: Individual assessment and intervention (Pupils in category D)

Children and young people within category D are pupils who present with high anxiety and low attendance. This document aims to help schools:

- Identify children who are experiencing emotionally based school refusal.
- Analyse the push and pull factors that may contribute to their school non-attendance.
- Gather the child or young person's views.
- Work collaboratively with the child, their family and any relevant multi-agency.
- Undertake individual planning around the key factors affecting the child's ability to attend school.
- Develop an action plan with the child and their family.

This document also aims to provide some guidance and advice to support children and young people who may have concerns about coronavirus.
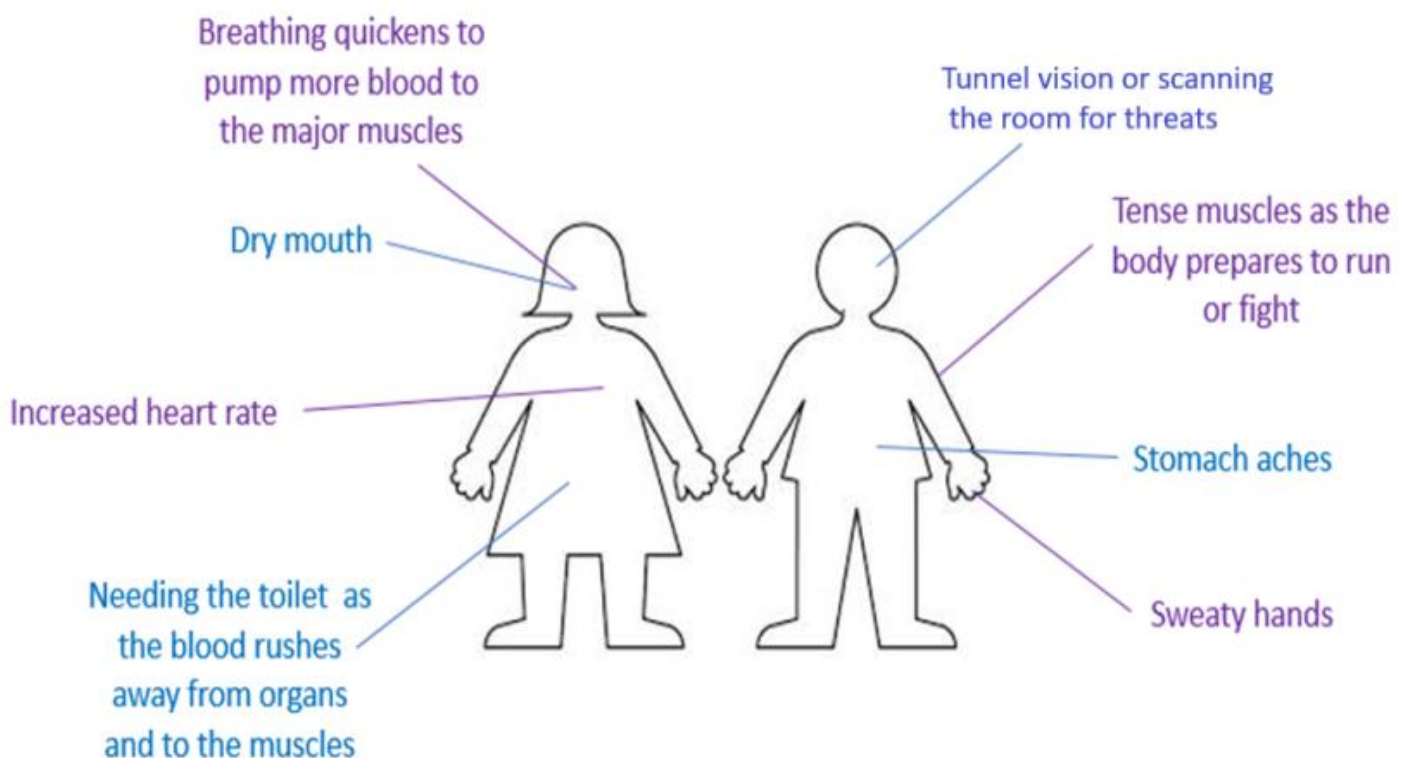
Section 1

What is anxiety?

It is completely natural for adults and children alike to sometimes feel worried or anxious, particularly in the current context.

When we feel anxious or scared our body prepares us to fight, run away (flight) or freeze. This is a survival mechanism that is in us all in which the blood rushes to our muscles. This can affect the person physically and make it very difficult for them to use the higher part of the brain (responsible for memory, attention, problem solving, listening etc.) Therefore, because of the evolutionary importance of focusing on the immediate threat, if a child is feeling anxious it will be very hard for them to learn and follow expectations.

The main body signals that somebody is experiencing fight, flight or freeze are…

Breathing quickens to pump more blood to the major muscles

Dry mouth

Increased heart rate

Needing the toilet as the blood rushes away from organs and to the muscles

Tunnel vision or scanning the room for threats

Tense muscles as the body prepares to run or fight

Stomach aches

Sweaty hands

Preventative approaches to reducing anxiety

Human Givens theory (see appendix) suggests that we all have nine emotional needs that need to be met for us to feel mentally well. The needs are outlined below with ideas of how each need can be met.

Security

Knowing/feeling that we are safe and that we are not going to be threatened emotionally or physically.

Ideas:

- Provide opportunities for children to talk about their feelings and emotions throughout the curriculum e.g. circle time or role play.
- Listen to and validate your child's emotions, e.g. "You seem to be feeling angry. I would feel angry if that happened to me. It's normal to feel angry sometimes".
- The use of sensory resets throughout the day (jumping jacks, skipping, running or wall / chair pushes) – see appendix E.
- The use of well-being rating scales and daily emotion 'check ins' where children can place their name on a chart to show how they are feeling.
- A quiet and safe space that children can access when they are feeling overwhelmed.
- The use of safety tools or walks (see appendix H).

Having a sense of belonging

Being part of groups beyond our family. Being pushed out/rejected from a group can be very distressing.

Ideas:

- Show children they belong to your school/class through displays/newsletters/ the language you use etc.
- Talk about differences positively.
- Give them a job or role.
- Support children to make friends and play together.
- Use of circle time.

Attention

Both giving and receiving enough.

Ideas:

- Use the child's name positively. Some children go for an entire week without hearing a teacher say their name positively and sometimes not saying it at all!
- Find out about them – do a pupil introduction sheet.
- Catch them 'being good'.
- Give a warm welcome.
- Acknowledge them if they have their hand up but you aren't able to come to them yet.
- Ask children to write down positive comments about each other – share these.

Competence and achievement

Feeling like we are good at something and it is recognised.

Ideas:

- Finding out what children are good at and promoting this wherever possible.
- Providing lots of small opportunities to experience success.
- Highlighting children's strengths and sharing these, encouraging children to identify their own strengths and each other's.
- Say the child's name positively.

Control

When we feel in charge of our own lives we are able to make decisions. Anxiety often increases when we think that others are 'taking control' of us and uncertainty increases when we don't know what is going to happen.

Ideas:

- Promote pupil voice and agree actions wherever possible.
- Give children simple choices, e.g. you can do X or Y.
- Help children know what to expect.

Friendship and intimacy

Emotional connection to other people.

Ideas:

- Use seating plans/paired work to promote friendships.
- Consider your playtime provision (see appendix F).
- Encourage children to attend clubs in line with their interests.
- Encourage children to find out what they have in common.
- Give children a key adult.

Meaning and purpose

There are 3 ways we achieve this: By being stretched towards a goal, feeling needed by others and having an overarching philosophy. Ideas:

- Create and promote values.
- Vicarious experiences – showing children people 'like them' being successful.
- Promoting a growth mind-set through talking to children and through written assessment feedback.
- Regular positive verbal encouragement.
- Encouraging kind acts.

Status and recognition

Being part of groups beyond our family. Being pushed out/rejected from a group can be very distressing. Ideas:

- Show children they belong to your school/class through displays / newsletters etc.
- Promote inclusivity.
- Give them a job or role.
- Support children to make friends and play together.
- Highlight achievements.

Privacy

General privacy and time and space on our own. Ideas:

- Their privacy is respected (other than in relation to safeguarding). For example, lots of children who are looked after feel that their private information (non-safeguarding related) is often shared in a way that it wouldn't be for many other pupils.
- Opportunities for 'quiet time' if needed.
- Considering how assessment information/success is shared, e.g. a sticker chart on the wall may encourage those with the most stickers but it also highlights those who have few stickers/ use of a traffic light or sad face on the board with names tells everyone who enters the classroom that the child has done something wrong.

Reducing anxiety in the classroom

Give a warm welcome.

Try not to ask why they are late/ why they've been absent.

Do whole class breathing exercises (appendix C).

Provide access to a quiet space if needed.

Create a predictable structure to lessons.

Include pupil voice on where they sit.

Give them a job or role in the classroom (if they are comfortable with this).

Be aware of whether the child is comfortable answering questions publicly.

Provide the opportunity to leave or enter before/ after others.

Signpost what will happen in your lesson (you could use a visual timetable).

Provide little regular opportunities to experience success.

View behaviour as communication (i.e. what is their behaviour telling you?).

Show them that you are holding them in mind
We all want to feel noticed, safe and connected to others in this world (although we may not always show this). Holding someone in mind means showing them that they are important and noticed (see appendix G).

Have a signal for overwhelmed
This could be a sign that they show you or tapping two fingers on their heart (British Sign Language for 'nervous') or you could create a code word. Sometimes just sharing how they are feeling can be enough to help them feel calm and stay in the lesson.

Use a transitional object
A transitional object can provide psychological comfort, especially at times of stress. The child can hold and have with them an object that reminds them of a calm or comforting place or time to help them keep calm. Think about using something in school that reminds the child of home and that is washable.

Section 2

Possible indicators of emotionally based school avoidance

School staff need to be vigilant in monitoring attendance of pupils noticing any patterns in non-attendance or changes to behaviour. Early recognition and intervention can help to break the cycle of non-attendance and reduce the chances of the difficulties and behaviours becoming entrenched.

What are the early warning signs?

- Change in attendance or punctuality (absent or late more often / just in time when they normally arrive in plenty of time).
- Unsettled on arrival to school.
- Crying and tearfulness.
- Pleading to stay at home.
- Refusal to get ready for school or to leave the house.
- For younger children reluctance to leave parents or get out of the car.
- Anxiety on separation and inappropriate dependence on family members (may worry about the safety of those at home).
- Absences for minor illnesses.
- Patterns in absences (particular days and/or subjects, after weekends and holidays).
- Social isolation and avoidance of
- Reluctance to attend school trips.
- Physical changes e.g. sweating, sickness, aching limbs, headaches, panic attacks, tummy aches, rapid weight loss or gain.
- Complaints of feeling ill on school days (psychosomatic illness).
- Severe emotional upset with excessive fearfulness and/or outbursts of temper.
- Challenging behaviours, particularly in relation to specific situations at school.
- Defensive aggression as a means of trying to control a situation that feels 'out-of-control'.
- Regular absence without indication of anti-social behaviours.
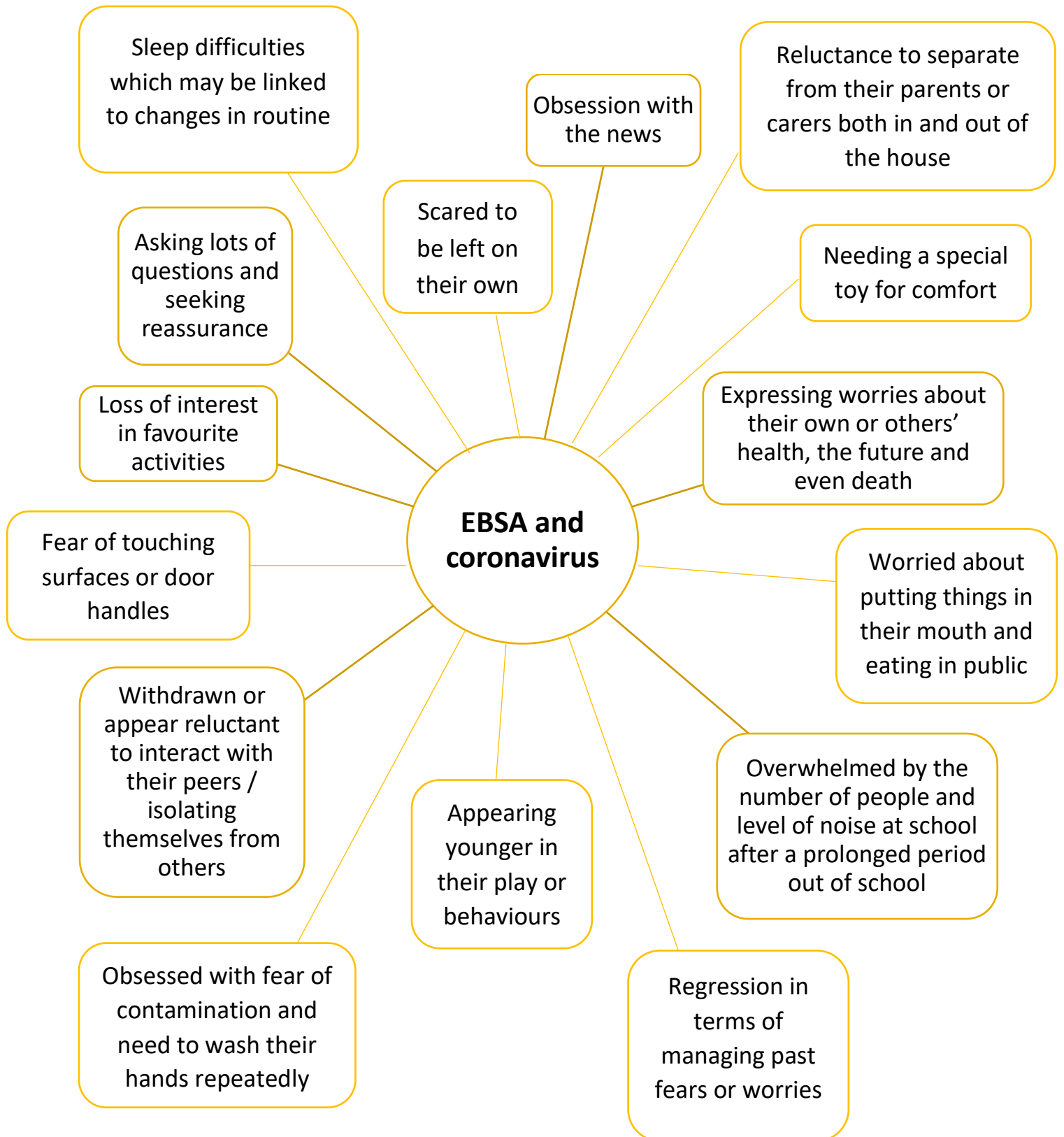- Depression and sense of isolation

classmates or peer group.

- Difficulties with sleep.
- Low self-esteem and lack of confidence.
- Confusion or extreme absent mindedness shown in school due to lack of concentration.
- Expresses a desire to attend classes but is unable to do so.
- Negative talk about school.
- Feel or show anxiety towards being in school.

resulting in, low self-esteem and lack of confidence.

- Difficulty attending school with periods of prolonged absence.
- Child determined not to leave home and stays away from school with the knowledge of the parent/carer.
- Disruption of day-to-day activities that affect the family and put parents/carers under a great deal of pressure.
- A history of anxiety (including EBSA) in the family.

Staff who meet and greet pupils on arrival to school are often well placed at the school gates or entrance to recognise any subtle changes in the child's punctuality or mood.

Teaching assistants and support staff are often more likely to hear children talking about school and are often able to recognise subtle behaviour changes.

Establishing positive relationships and good communication with parents and carers will support them to feel able to discuss any concerns about their child's thoughts, feelings and behaviours about school.

It is important to recognise that many children may present with specific difficulties and behaviours associated with coronavirus. For example:

Sleep difficulties which may be linked to changes in routine

Obsession with the news

Reluctance to separate from their parents or carers both in and out of the house

Scared to be left on their own

Asking lots of questions and seeking reassurance

Needing a special toy for comfort

Loss of interest in favourite activities

Expressing worries about their own or others' health, the future and even death

EBSA and coronavirus

Fear of touching surfaces or door handles

Worried about putting things in their mouth and eating in public

Withdrawn or appear reluctant to interact with their peers / isolating themselves from others

Appearing younger in their play or behaviours

Overwhelmed by the number of people and level of noise at school after a prolonged period out of school

Obsessed with fear of contamination and need to wash their hands repeatedly

Regression in terms of managing past fears or worries

These difficulties may become problematic depending on their intensity, frequency and duration. If they interfere with daily life or on all aspects of their life, it is advisable to seek support.

Identifying, planning and intervention

What does it look like?

1. Identify the pupils who may be at risk of not returning to school. Look at the indicators for pupils who may have caused concern or their parents are identifying a new concern. Be aware of the questions pupils are asking to identify their worries about corona virus.

2. Analyse the push / pull factors associated with the pupil's non-attendance with parents, carers. This will allow you to identify the key issues that need planning for.

3. Multi-agency collaboration (e.g. Educational Psychology Service, Ladywood Outreach, Behaviour Support, CAMHS) involving parents and pupils to identify and clarify the issues around returning to school.

4. Devise an action plan with parent and pupil (see page 26 for ideas to include).

5. Monitor the impact of the interventions used following the graduated approach of assess, plan, do, review.

The role of the Educational Psychology Service

Some schools may want to and feel comfortable working with the family to identify the push and pull factors and develop a plan to support the pupil's identified needs. The Educational Psychology Service (EPS) is also able to offer support to schools and families where there are concerns about emotionally based school refusal.

- Supporting teaching staff use of psychoeducation for their own knowledge or to educate pupils in **normal responses** of anxiety around returning to school, how they may be thinking or feeling, simple coping strategies (see EPS newsletters), circles of support and setting up key adults.
- Supporting staff and pupils in developing coping strategies (use the working with worries ideas), relaxation and using the language of resilience as well as anxiety.
- Deliver training in approaches suggested in this resource pack (e.g. emotion coaching).
- Educating pupils about coronavirus.

Push and pull factors

The factors that contribute to school non-attendance are unique to the individual child or young person and can be described as 'push' and 'pull' factors.

'Push' factors – that push the child away from school may include bullying, peer or teacher relationships, difficulty with learning or exam pressure, etc.

'Pull' factors – that may pull the child away from attending school and can include separation anxiety, family illness, marital breakdown, etc.

A Checklist of Risk Factors has been adapted from 'What Triggers a School Refusal' in a booklet produced by Gloucestershire Educational Psychology Service. It is aimed at helping to explore the possible causes of emotionally based school non-attendance and can be used as a screening instrument for identified pupils. It also includes a section to record any possible risk factors related to corona virus. See appendix K for a Checklist of Risk Factors template.

	Loss and Change	Family Dynamics	Curriculum and Learning	Social / Personal	Stress and Anxiety	Coronavirus specific Risk
Linked to Negative Emotion	Death of a pet	Illness in the family	Fear of failure and subsequent humiliation	Lack of supporting friends	Panic disorder or diagnosed mental health disorder	Family Members who are worried about re-opening schools too soon
	Death of parent, relative friend	Inappropriate parenting	Keeps feelings to self	Seems to have few friends	Stress about letting people down	Family member who is being shielded (fear of opening risk to loved ones)
	Parents arguing/ fighting	Sudden traumatic event at home	Exam or test anxieties	Feeling overwhelmed by academic or social demands		OCD or Anxiety tipping into traits of OCD

Loss of a classmate	Moving house or area	Negative perception of school, learning or the future	Negative perception of physical self / being body self- conscious	Parental separation anxiety	Inaccurate pre-conceived ideas about COVID-19 (lack of knowledge)
Loss of home or belongings through housing issues / fire, etc		Often seems to be tired	Seems somewhat anxious		Has lost contact with friends
Moving schools		Low self esteem	LAC status		Fears related to the wearing of masks (e.g. hospital phobia) or other social distancing measures such as queuing
		Seems somewhat depressed or anxious	Refugee status		Knowing a child who has been ill from COVID-19
					Has become withdrawn from normal interests whilst isolating
Being a young carer for sibling or parent at home	Parental mental and physical wellbeing				Fears of family members becoming unwell
	Birth of a new child				
	Parental separation or divorce				

Linked to parental attachment / dependence

Linked to Tangible Reinforcement		Parental attention whilst at home	Having been home-schooled in the past	Being able to engage more in a personal hobby whilst not in school		
			Praise and reward given for tasks done at home but not for school work			
Linked to avoidance	Transition to secondary school and adjustment to new expectations and staff		Few leisure interests	Social communication difficulties or ASD	Bullying, including cyber bullying	Hearing impaired (or other language issues) and anxious about being unable to lip-read if masks are worn
			Poor attention and concentration	Introverted / Shy	Poor special education or pastoral support	Changes in class sizes, peer groupings and classroom layouts
			Unidentified learning needs that make it hard to access the learning environment and curriculum	Ethnic/ language issues	Individual temperament – some children may be predisposed to developing anxiety related problems	Fears of catching the virus themselves
			School size	Previous significant humiliating event in school	Medical difficulties	

Working with the family

Arranging to meet with the child or young person's parent / carer is a helpful starting point when a pupil may be struggling to attend school. There may be friendship difficulties, high levels of anxiety, emotional issues, family issues that can be identified with appropriate support put in place early. These are questions you could ask to help complete your grid for the specific child you are working with.

Staff may want to think about asking parents / carers about the following:

- Child's development and educational history.
- Friendship groups (in and out of school).
- Concerns about academic progress.
- Any potential changes or losses within the family and child's life.
- What the child says about school.
- Any fears or difficulties the child has reported.
- Typical morning and evening routine.
- Behaviours and symptoms of anxiety.
- What the child does when they are absent from school.
- The impact of non-attendance on various family members.
- Other aspects of family life that are affected.
- Family's views and ideas about the problem and possible ways to move forward.

It is also important to talk and reflect on things that have been helpful in the past or current situation.

Using a solution focused approach staff could ask about:

- Times when the child has got into school – what was different about these times?
- What the child reports to be working well in school e.g. friends, specific teachers or lessons.
- What has helped in the past when thing have been difficult.
- Strategies that have helped in managing the child's anxiety.

- Support networks for the young person and family.

At this point if you have enough information you can complete a plan (see page 26). If further information is needed the following published resources are available. The Educational Psychology Service is available for support and guidance on this.

Published resources that you can use:

- **School Refusal Assessment Scale-Revised (SRAS-R)** can be used to help evaluate school avoidance behaviour and identify the reasons why the child may be avoiding school. An interactive version can be found here: https://www.oxfordclinicalpsych.com/view/10.1093/med:psych/9780195308297.001.0001/med-9780195308297-interactive-pdf-004.pdf

- **Attendance Risk Monitoring (ARM) Schedule Pupil Interview and Parent Interview** – West Sussex Educational Psychology Service. This questionnaire helps identify possible underlying reasons for the pupil's non-attendance. It can be found on pages 36-37 of the West Sussex Manual: https://westsussex-local-offer.s3.amazonaws.com/public/system/attachments/475/original/ebsr_manual.pdf

Working with the child

It is important to provide the child or young person the opportunity to express their views and ideas about the difficulties they are experiencing and what they feel might help them.

There are a range of approaches and resources that can help adults working with the pupil to elicit their thoughts, these include:

- The card sort activity (see appendix A) which can be used to explore the pupil's thoughts and feelings about school and factors that may contribute to their difficulties in wanting to attend school. *This activity also contains cards to help identify any fears and worries the child or young person may have about corona virus.*
- Visual aids such as feeling thermometers, body maps or the Incredible 5-point scale (see appendix B for an example) can be used to develop their awareness of their emotions and to measure how they feel in different situations.
- The *'what is anxiety?'* worksheet (see appendix B) can be used to help pupils understand how anxiety works and the physical symptoms the individual may be experiencing.
- Scaling is a useful tool to help explore and gain a measure of how the young person is feeling. You could ask:
  - On a scale of 1-10 where 10 would be the most positive (ask the child to define or use their own description) and 0 being the most negative where would they put themself on the scale?
  - Can you think of someone 2 points higher? What do they do that's different?
  - Where would you put yourself on the scale last year?
  - What would need to happen for you to be one point higher?
- Developing an anxiety or exposure ladder can be helpful (see appendix I). Ask the young person to identify the situation in school which they are most worried about, for example going back into a mainstream lesson or eating in the dining hall, and then less fearful

situations working down the ladder. The bottom step of the ladder would be the situation that the child fears or worries about the least.

- For younger children it may be helpful to ask them to draw a picture to show how they are feeling or of their school or classroom when exploring their positive and negative experiences of school.
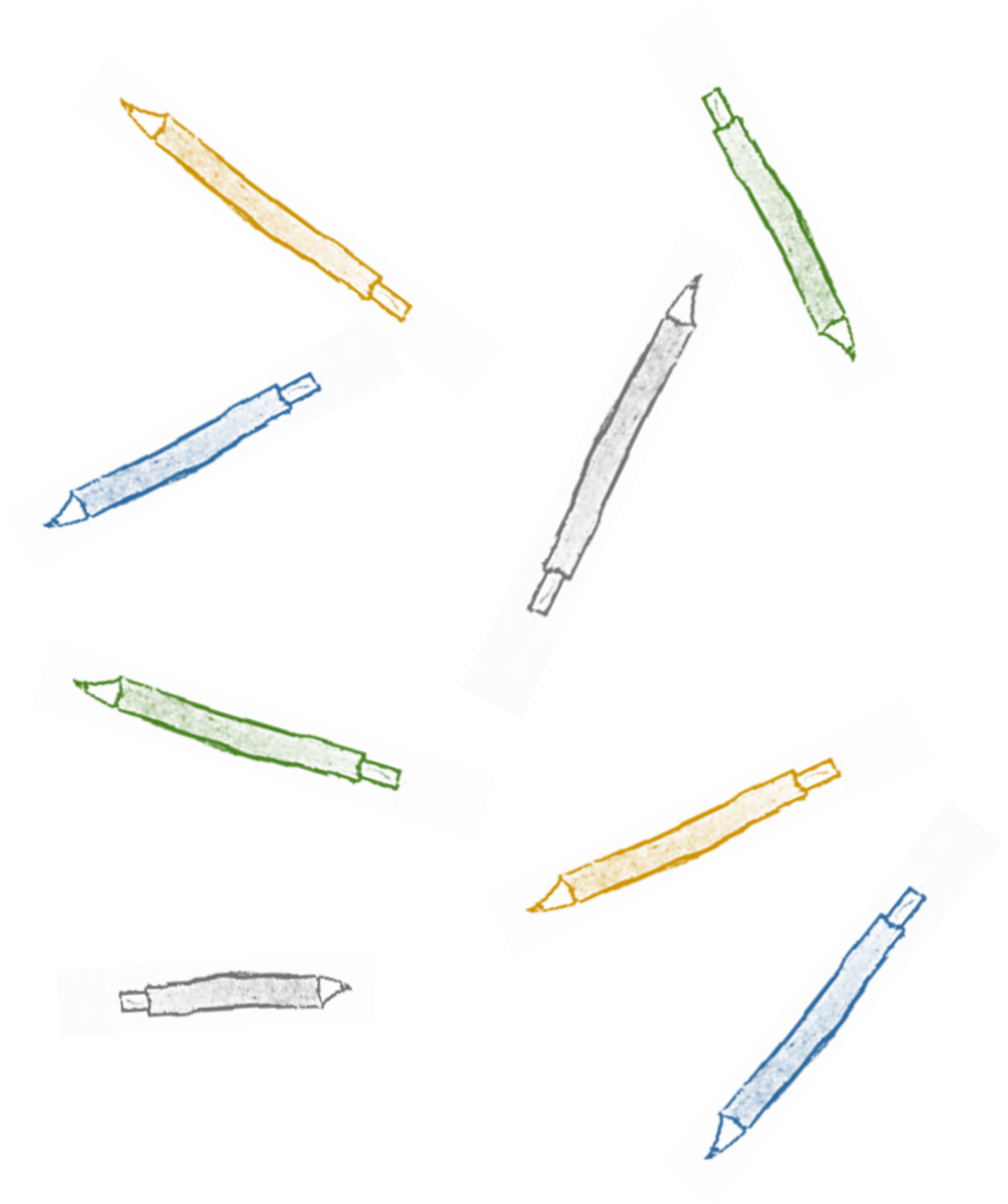
Individual planning

The following area ideas to help you begin to create an action plan to support an individual child or young person:

Better break and lunchtimes

(see appendix F).

Use of an Emotion Coaching Approach to help children to understand and regulate their feelings (see appendix L.

Engage other services.

Provide access to a quiet space with time with their key adult.

Help children recognise the physiological warning signs of worry. The Incredible 5-Point Scale is a visual tool that can help children to develop an awareness of their emotions (see appendix B).

Opportunities to call home at scheduled times (if they are worried about a parent for example).

Identify existing school routines that create or prevent anxiety.

Regular resets (see appendix E)

Find out what works for individuals and schedule planned time into each day for regular resets e.g. movement or mindfulness breaks.

Create a Sunday night/ Monday morning plan.

Gentle and positive start to each day (see appendix J).

Use and identification of a Key Adult as the contact for the family, both in terms of explaining the plan and being the known person available for the family should questions, issues, etc. arise.

What should go into the plan?

- Systems of staff support that are already in place in settings (e.g. a 'check in') and how these will continue with staff they are most comfortable with.
- Peer support mechanisms and how to promote these within social distancing (e.g. support sessions).
- Activities that allow them to express their feelings about what has happened and which address anxiety (individual intervention if needed).
- Flexible timetabling.
- Phased return using the anxiety or exposure ladder approach: most worried about to least worried about (see appendix I).
- Small successes, demonstrations of positive attitude and willingness to take risks should be celebrated. Confidence gained from early achievement is so important.
- Coping statements for the child once the identifying beliefs around school have been sought (e.g. "I can't do it" into "I can ask for help like other students").
- Relaxation approaches (see appendix B).
- Information on the child's resilience factors as well as anxiety factors.

For a list of useful resources and websites to support children, young people and their families who may be experiencing emotionally based school non-attendance see appendix M. For further information and support please contact Bolton Educational Psychology Service.

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