



# Emotionally Based School Avoidance: A resource for parents and carers

Created by 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 the phrase used to describe children who are non-attending school or finding it very difficult to go to school due to emotional reasons.

The child usually feels so anxious that they do not feel able to go to school (see page 6 to learn more about anxiety).

### Avoiding or refusing

Children who avoid school due to emotional reasons are usually overwhelmed by their feelings of anxiety making it very hard for them to go to school, rather than it being that they just do not want to go or do not like school.

We try to use the word 'avoiding' rather than 'refusing'. 'School refusal' might suggest that the child has control over their non-attendance, this is not typically the case.

## What are the emotional reasons why children avoid going to school?

There are lots of reasons that often link to each other and can be related to both home and school.

Research suggests that there are four main reasons:

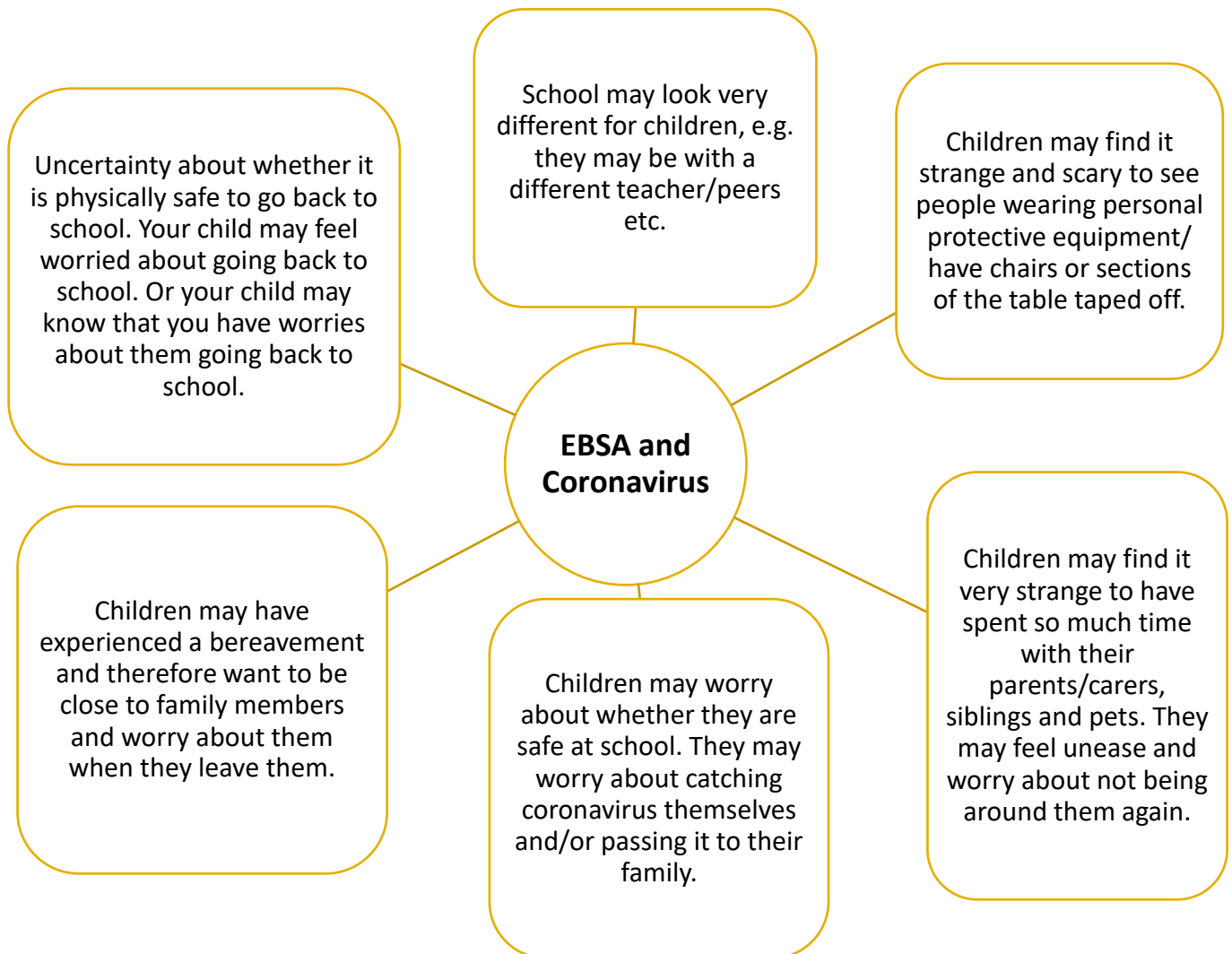
1. To avoid uncomfortable feelings brought on by attending school, *e.g. feelings of anxiety and/or low mood.*
2. To avoid situations that may be stressful *e.g. academic demands, social time with classmates and/ or aspects of the school environment (noise/ busy corridors, etc).*



3. To reduce separation anxiety (e.g. not wanting to leave a loved one at home or not be with them), or to gain attention from significant others *e.g. parents or other family members.*
4. To get or do things that they like outside of school *e.g. going shopping, playing computer games during school time, spending time with a loved one.*



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

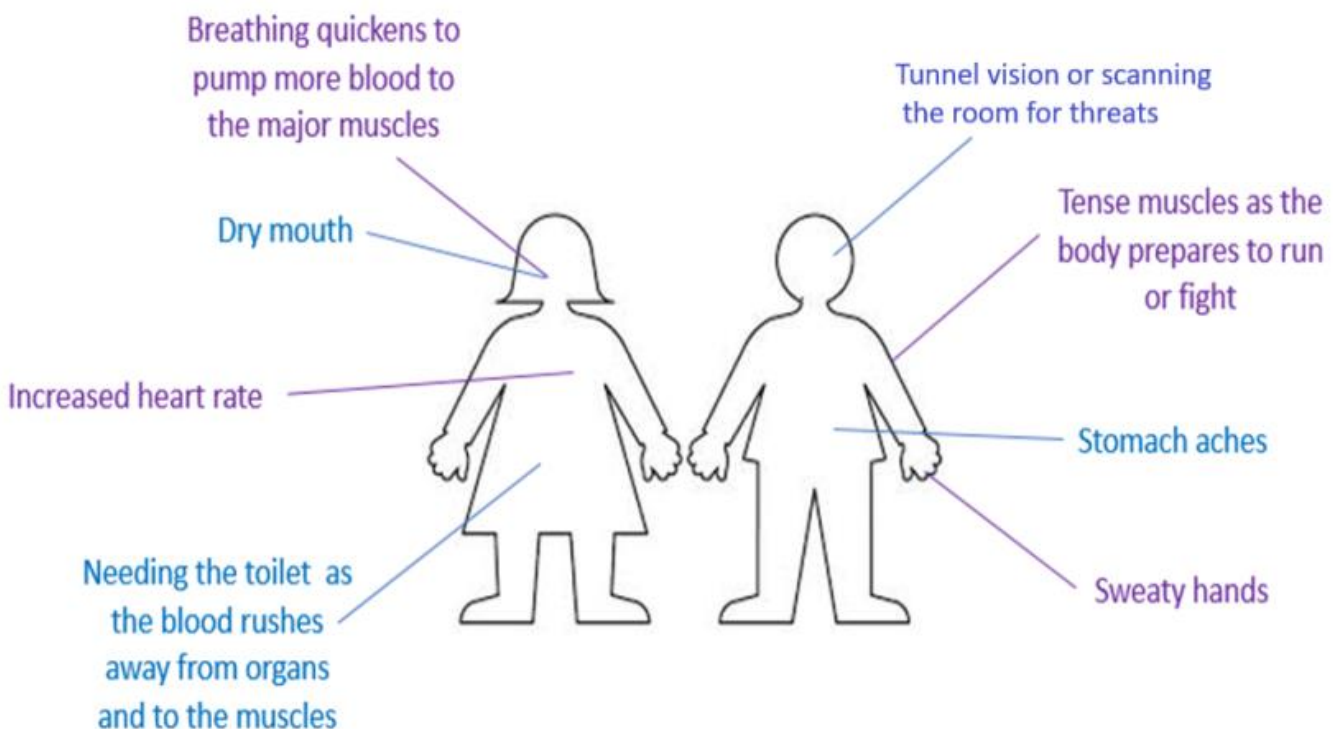


## What is anxiety?

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 (shout, hit), run away (flight) or freeze (keep very still, head down). This is a survival mechanism that is in us all when 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 built-in 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...



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.



## Preventative approaches to reducing anxiety

Human Givens theory suggests that we all have nine emotional needs that need to be met for us to feel mentally well in general. These needs are outlined below with ideas of how each need can be met.

### Competence and achievement

Feeling like we are good at something and that this is recognised.

Ideas:

- Find out what your child is good at and promote this wherever possible.
- Provide lots of small opportunities to experience success.
- Give them something useful and purposeful to do.
- Highlight your child's strengths and share these, encouraging your child say what their own strengths are and to point out strengths in others.

### Having a sense of belonging

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

Ideas:

- Help children to see all of the different groups that they belong to.
- Talk about differences positively.
- Give them a job or role at home.
- Support children to make friends and play together.

## 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 share their feelings and emotions e.g. through drawing, talking 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".
- Do lots of "sensory resets" (physical activity) with them before and after school (star jumps, skipping, running, dancing) – see the child / young people's guide.
- Use well-being rating scales and daily emotion 'check ins' where children can place their name on a chart to show how they are feeling.
- Provide a quiet and safe space that children can access when they are feeling overwhelmed.

## Privacy

General privacy and time and space on our own

Ideas:

- Ensure they have age-appropriate private time and their privacy is respected.
- Make opportunities for 'quiet time' if needed.







## 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:

- Try to include your child in decisions about them where you can.
- Give your child simple choices, e.g. do you want peas or carrots?
- Help your child know what to expect.

## Friendship and intimacy

Emotional connection to other people.

Ideas:

- Encourage friendships.
- Encourage them to play and join in too.
- Encourage your child to make time for the things they enjoy.
- Encourage your child to find out what they have in common with other children/ family members.

## Status and recognition

Having a role and being seen.

Ideas:

- Talk to your child about how important they are to others (e.g. as a daughter/ sibling granddaughter/ cousin/ friend/ classmate etc.)
- Give them a job or role.
- Support children to make friends and play together.
- Highlight achievements.



## Attention

Both giving and receiving enough attention.

Ideas:

- Use the child's name positively.
- Share your interests / favourite things, e.g. take turns to choose an activity that one person enjoys for you to do together.
- Catch them 'being good' -make sure to give them the most attention when they are behaving the way that you would like them to.
- Give a warm welcome after school.
- If they want your attention but you are busy, agree a time later on when you can give them your full attention even for a short time.
- Play / spend time with your child (see page 15 for websites giving lots of play ideas and activities).

## Meaning and purpose

There are 3 ways we get this:

1. Working towards a goal
2. Feeling needed by others
3. Having things they believe in

Ideas:

- Create and promote values.
- Show your child people 'like them' being successful (at their learning/ different jobs/ interests/ hobbies).
- Help your child believe that they can always get better at something, e.g. 'you can do this', 'you can't do it yet, but you will'.
- Encourage kind acts.



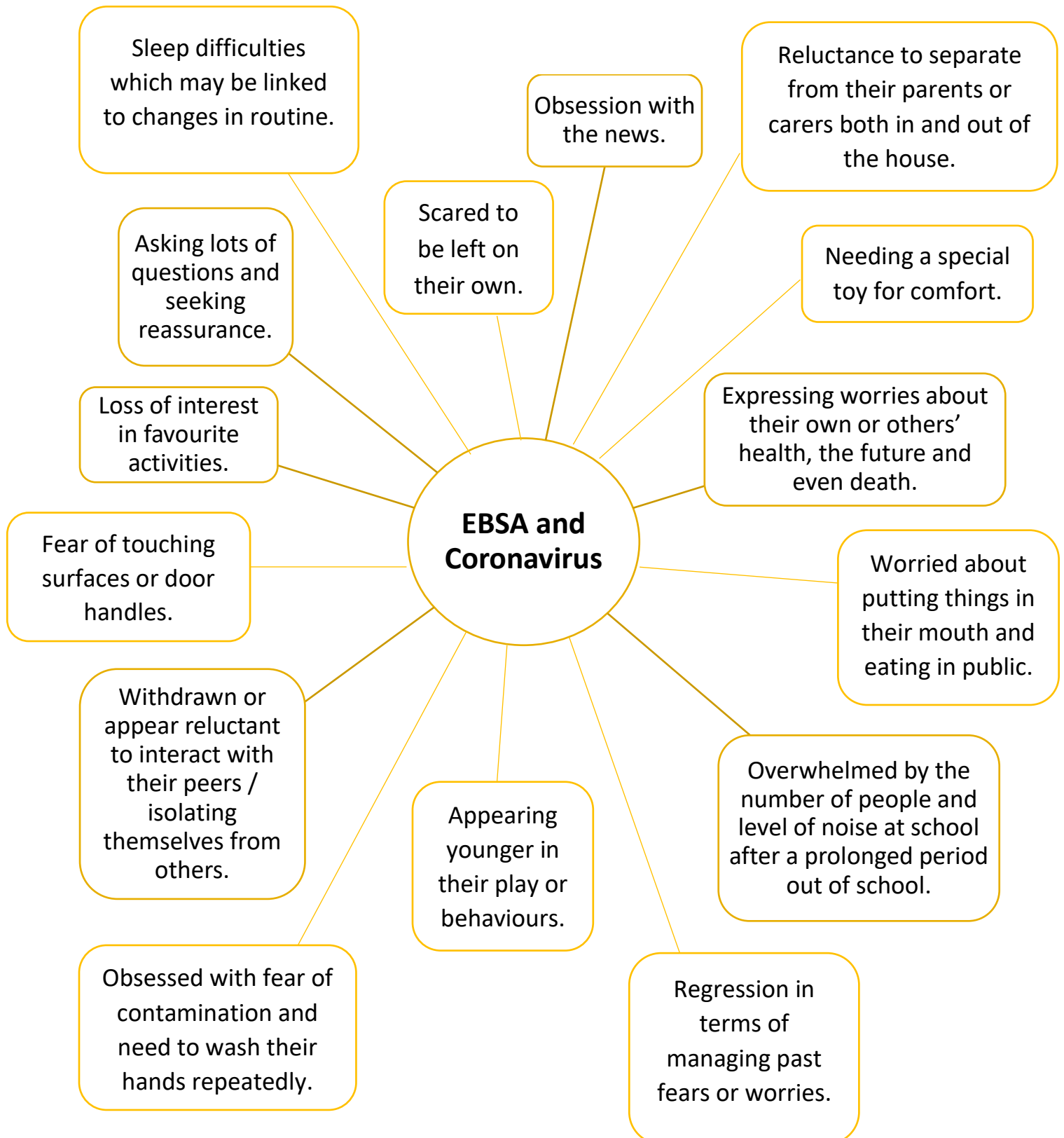
## What are the early warning signs of EBSA?

- 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 classmates or peer group.
- 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.
- 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.
- Low mood and sense of isolation resulting in, low self-esteem and lack of confidence.
- Difficulty attending school with periods of prolonged absence.
- 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.



- Difficulties with sleep.

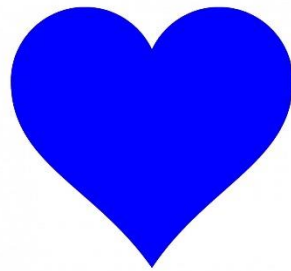
It is important to recognise that many children may present with specific difficulties and behaviours associated with coronavirus. For example:





## How can I help my child go back to school after school closures?

- Share with your child what they can expect when they go back to school.
- Make the school drop off and pick up as predictable for your child as possible.
- Try to re-connect your child with their peers. Could they chat or play a game online or have a social distance meet up in the park?
- Give messages of safety.
- Reassure your child that you/ your family will be safe at home/work and that they do not need to worry about you.
- A transitional object might help. In the current circumstance this cannot 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 (be aware of frequent handwashing in school and that you may need to draw it somewhere else).



## **My child is emotionally based school avoiding. What can I do to help them?**

1. There are lots of reasons that children avoid going to school. Try not to blame yourself or your child.
2. Work through the activities in the 'Feeling worried about going to school' child's pack together and identify ways of them being calm.
3. Get in touch with your special educational needs coordinator (SENCo) at school and share your concerns.
4. Think about and share with school what you think are some of the reasons for your child's non-attendance. This will allow you and school to identify the key issues that need planning for.
5. 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:
  - a. Times when the child has got into school – what was different about these times?
  - b. What the child says is, or was, working well in school e.g. friends, specific teachers or lessons?
  - c. What has helped in the past when things have been difficult?



- d. Strategies that have helped in managing the child's anxiety.
- e. Support networks for the young person and family.

6. Devise an action plan with school and your child. Things that could go in the plan may include:
- Trusted staff as a key adult and organising peer support
  - Flexible timetabling and a gradual transition back based on the anxiety ladder (see child's resource pack)
  - Opportunities for the child to show what they are good at and activities they are more confident in
  - Coping statements and relaxation techniques in school
  - Regular 'down' time
  - A Sunday night / Monday morning plan
  - Break and lunch time plans
7. You can request that the school seek support from other agencies if you feel that it is needed.

## Helpful numbers and websites:

**Bolton information and advisory service (IAS):** Bolton IAS is a statutory service, as referenced in law. Bolton IAS provide legally informed information and advice to parents, carers and young people between the ages of birth and 25 years across education, health and social care. Website: <https://iasbolton.com/home>, Tel: [01204 848722](tel:01204848722).

### Mental health and wellbeing

- NHS website: [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)
- World Health Organisation resource; 'Helping children and young people manage stress': [https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/helping-children-cope-with-stress-print.pdf?sfvrsn=f3a063ff\\_2](https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/helping-children-cope-with-stress-print.pdf?sfvrsn=f3a063ff_2)
- For an E-book on human givens and other free resources go to: [www.hgi.org.uk](http://www.hgi.org.uk)
- Useful resilience framework: <https://www.boingboing.org.uk/resilience/resilient-therapy-resilience-framework/>
- Webinar: Balancing the nervous system: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gmWoZA-1YuY&t=3s>

- Webinar: Safety and containment in uncertain times: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m3wVqt6Z6NA&t=33s>
- Webinar: Sustaining resilience: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sQuMKqcSbZA&t=9s>
- Webinar: Breathing techniques: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZJMkdU2gkPI&t=422s>
- Webinar: Yoga based ideas for schools and families: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TYLzZzXzqbl&t=924s><https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TYLzZzXzqbl&t=924s>
- Ideas and resources on self-care for young people: <https://www.annafreud.org/on-my-mind/self-care/>
- Advice and resources on supporting children and young people experiencing anxiety: <https://www.annafreud.org/coronavirus-support/coronavirus/>

### Supporting children with a diagnosis of autism

- Free resources: <https://www.reachoutasc.com/resources/transition-to-new-class>
- STARS website – social stories on coming back to school after lockdown: <http://www.starsteam.org.uk/coronavirus-resources>

### Helping children to understand coronavirus

- British Psychological Society advice on how to talk to children about coronavirus: <https://www.bps.org.uk/news-and-policy/bps-highlights-importance-talking-children-about-coronavirus>
- UNICEF have produced advice for Parents/Carers and Teachers: [www.unicef.org/coronavirus/how-teachers-can-talk-children-about-coronavirus-disease-covid-19](http://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/how-teachers-can-talk-children-about-coronavirus-disease-covid-19)
- A picture book for children who are worried about coronavirus <https://www.psychpro.org.uk/s/feed/0D53z000077Mbl9CAK>
- ELSA have created a story to support children in understanding the corona-virus and a story on handwashing (available in multiple languages): <https://www.elsa-support.co.uk/coronavirus-story-for-children/>
- An explanation of COVID 19 for children by Cardiff and Vale Child Health Psychology [www.monmouthshire.gov.uk/app/uploads/2020/03/Psychological-support-for-children-coping-with-COVID19.pdf](http://www.monmouthshire.gov.uk/app/uploads/2020/03/Psychological-support-for-children-coping-with-COVID19.pdf)

### Supporting bereavement

- Bereavement and loss counselling in Bolton: website: [www.1pointbolton.org.uk](http://www.1pointbolton.org.uk), tel: 02104 917745, email: [silverwellbeing@1pointbolton.org.uk](mailto:silverwellbeing@1pointbolton.org.uk)
- A collection of resources <http://www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk/help-around-a-death/covid-19.aspx>





## Supporting play

- The International Play Association has resources around play in crisis: [www.ipaworld.org/resources/for-parents-and-carers-play-in-crisis/](http://www.ipaworld.org/resources/for-parents-and-carers-play-in-crisis/)
- Play ideas and activities to do at home: <https://www.righttoplay.org.uk/en-uk/national-offices/national-office-uk/get-involved/playathome-games/>
- Lots of different resources for parents and carers on play and available in multiple languages too: <http://ipaworld.org/resources/for-parents-and-carers-play-in-crisis/>
- The International Play Association has resources around play in crisis: [www.ipaworld.org/resources/for-parents-and-carers-play-in-crisis/](http://www.ipaworld.org/resources/for-parents-and-carers-play-in-crisis/)
- Webinar: The power of play: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sQuMKqcSbZA&t=9s>

### The role of the Educational Psychology Service

Some schools may want to, and feel comfortable working with the family to identify the factors stopping children attending school and to 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 emotional based school refusal:

- Supporting teaching staff using 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, plus educating pupils about Coronavirus.
- Supporting staff and pupils individually in developing coping strategies (use the working with worries ideas), relaxation and using the language of resilience as well as anxiety.
- Delivering training in approaches suggested in this resource pack (e.g. emotion coaching)

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