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Understanding Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) and Barriers to Attendance

A guide for parent(s)/carer(s)



1. About this guide

You may have opened this guide because your child is becoming increasingly distressed about school, is attending less often or is struggling to access education even when they are in the school building. They may be missing particular lessons, managing only part of the day or currently finding it impossible to attend at all.

You may understand some of the reasons, or you may still be trying to make sense of what is happening. You might feel worried, exhausted, frustrated or unsure what to do next.

You are not alone, and you are not expected to resolve these difficulties by yourself.

As a parent/carer, you hold important knowledge about your child: what you notice at home, what increases their distress, what helps them feel safer and what may have changed over time. This knowledge should be listened to and included in decisions about support.

This guide is designed to help you understand Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA), explore the barriers affecting your child's attendance and work with school and other professionals to identify what needs to change.

This guide is designed to supplement the main Barnet EBSA and Barriers to Setting Attendance Guidance for Schools, Families and Professionals. Please keep an eye on the Barnet Local Offer page; we are currently in the process of adding an EBSA page with guidance and additional tools.

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We would like to thank parents in our Barnet community who have taken the time to review and contribute to this guidance.

Executive Summary

A quick overview for parents/carers of children with Emotional Based School Avoidance (EBSA)

If your child is becoming distressed about school, struggling to attend or finding it hard to cope with the school day, you are not alone. This summary provides a brief overview of the guide.

What is EBSA?

EBSA (Emotionally Based School Avoidance) is when emotional distress creates significant barriers **to attending school or accessing education.**

It is a signal that something about a child or young person's wider circumstances is not currently manageable.

It is NOT defiance, a simple choice not to attend, or the result of poor parenting.

Key Messages



EBSA can affect children who attend school but struggle to access learning as well as those who cannot attend



There is rarely one cause, and barriers build up over time



Your child's voice and your knowledge should be heard and used



Progress includes wellbeing, safety, engagement and learning, not just attendance

Understanding the barriers

Understanding the barriers that affect attendance is essential to identifying what needs to change. This may include learning differences, the school environment, relationships, uncertainty, health, separation, life changes or unmet Special Educational Needs.

What can help at home?

When a young person feels overwhelmed, it may be difficult for them to think clearly or explain what is wrong. Helpful approaches include:

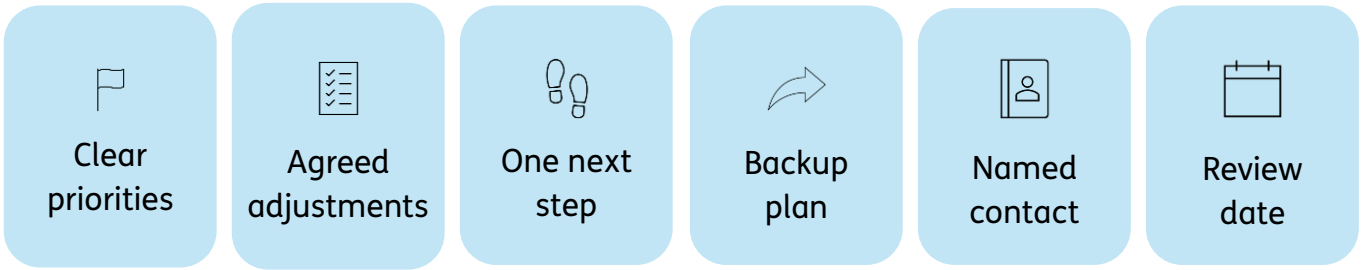
- Reducing pressure and helping them feel safe
- Allowing time for recovery through rest, movement or trusted people
- Planning one small, manageable next step when they are ready

Practical tools are included at the end of this guide

Working effectively with school

Home and school often see different parts of a child's experience. Sharing information can help build a clearer picture of what is happening.

A helpful support plan includes:



When EBSA has become entrenched

For some children and young people, the barriers to attendance become so overwhelming that they are unable to access school for a prolonged period. They may need significant time to recover.
The Moving from Recovery to Rediscovery (Holder, 2024) approach focuses on:



These steps do not always happen in order, and there is no fixed timescale.

Looking after yourself

EBSA can affect the whole family. You are not to blame, your wellbeing matters, and support is available for parent/carers and siblings too.

Key Takeaway

EBSA is a response to emotional distress, not a refusal to learn. Understanding barriers, reducing pressure and building trust together helps children re-engage with education.

Where should I start?

You do not need to read this guide from beginning to end. Choose the description that feels closest to what your family needs now.

My child is attending school but appears distressed, exhausted or unable to access parts of the day
Start with Understanding EBSA and Exploring barriers to attendance

I want to know how to respond at home, reduce pressure or find a manageable next step
Go to What can help at home?

We need a meeting, written plan or better communication with school
Go to Working effectively with school

The difficulties have continued for some time, or my child needs significant recovery and reconnection
Go to When EBSA has become entrenched

My child is missing education, following a part-time timetable or facing attendance action
Go to Attendance, education and your rights

I think unmet Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) may be contributing, or my child needs reasonable adjustments or SEN Support
Go to When your child needs more SEND support

The situation is affecting my wellbeing, relationships or other people in the family
Go to Supporting yourself and your family

I need local services, independent advice or urgent support
Go to Barnet services, guidance and further help

If you are unsure where to begin, tell school what you and your child have been experiencing and ask who will be your main contact. Your child does not need a diagnosis or a complete explanation before support can begin.

If someone may be at immediate risk, use the urgent support routes in **Barnet services, guidance and further help**. If someone is in immediate danger, call **999** or go to **A&E**.

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Understanding EBSA

3. Understanding EBSA

Section summary:

- EBSA can affect children and young people who attend school but struggle to access learning, as well as those who are currently unable to attend
- EBSA is a response to emotional distress and barriers to attendance, not defiance or simply choosing not to attend
- There is rarely one simple cause, and no one person is to blame
- Understanding the barriers affecting attendance is essential for identifying what needs to change
- Children and young people should be involved in decisions about support, and parent/carers' knowledge should be heard and used
- Progress includes wellbeing, feeling safer, engagement and access to learning, not attendance alone

What is EBSA?

EBSA stands for emotionally based school avoidance.

It is an umbrella term used when emotional distress creates significant barriers to attending school or accessing education.

EBSA can affect children and young people in different ways. A child or young person may:

- Attend school but experience significant distress in lessons without outward signs
- Find it difficult or impossible to enter particular lessons or environments
- Arrive late, leave early or manage only part of the school day

- Spend time in corridors, toilets or support spaces instead of lessons
- Attend inconsistently
- Become unable to enter the school building or attend school at all

Your child does not need a diagnosis, or to be absent from school, for their distress and barriers to attendance to be taken seriously. Support should begin when concerns emerge, including when a child or young person is still attending school.

The word **avoidance** can sound as though a child or young person is making a deliberate choice. In EBSA, avoidance is better understood as an attempt to move away from something that feels unsafe, overwhelming or unmanageable. It should not be interpreted as defiance or simply refusing to attend.

EBSA is not a diagnosis, and it does not describe one particular cause. It describes a pattern of emotional distress and barriers to attendance that needs to be understood.

EBSA is a signal

EBSA is a signal that something about school, or a child or young person's wider circumstances, is not currently manageable. There is rarely one simple cause, and different factors can interact and build over time.

EBSA is not caused by poor parenting, and the aim is not to find someone to blame.

The most helpful starting question is not:

How do we make them attend?

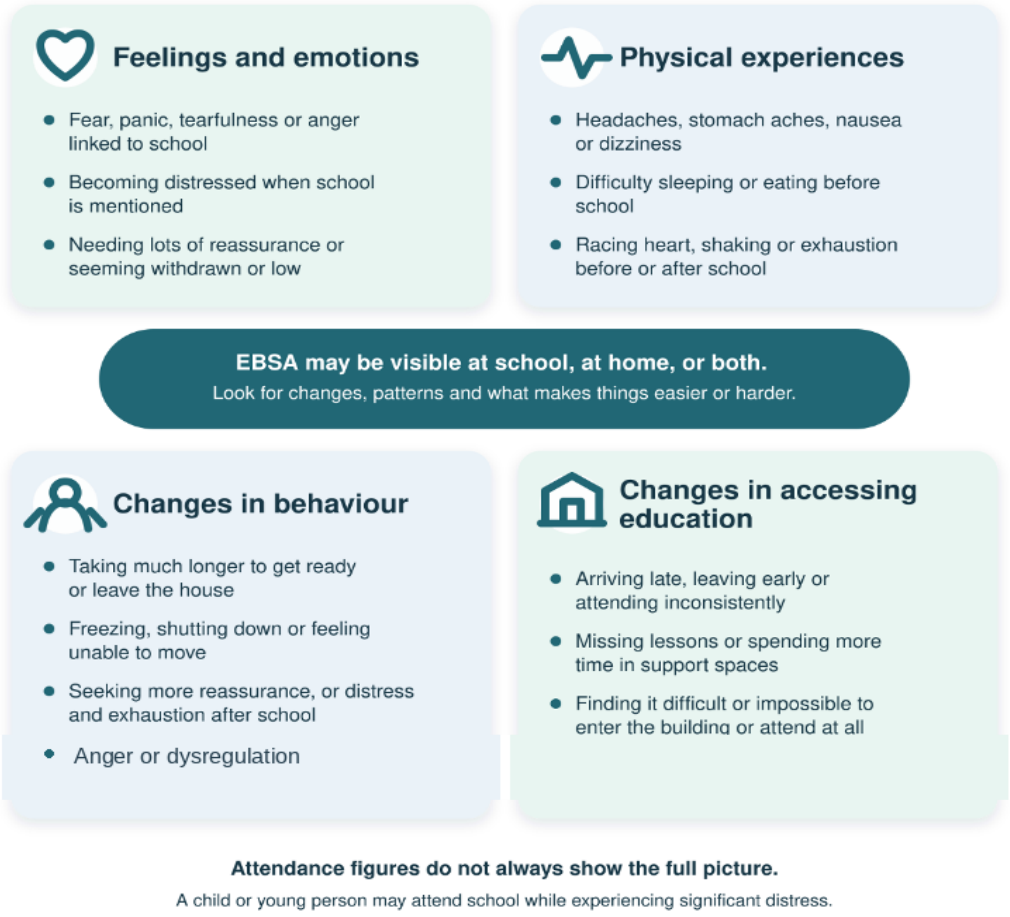
It is

What is making attendance difficult, and what needs to change?"

What might EBSA look like?

EBSA can develop gradually or appear following a change, difficult experience or period of absence. The signs may be obvious, but they can also be easy to miss, particularly when a child or young person attends school despite experiencing significant distress.

Physical experiences such as headaches, stomach aches, nausea or exhaustion are real and should be taken seriously. They may be linked to the body's response to stress, although medical advice should be sought where needed.



Looking beyond attendance

A child or young person does not need to be absent from school to be experiencing EBSA. Some may hide their distress or use enormous amounts of energy to attend. School staff may see a student who appears quiet, compliant or settled, while their parent/carers see exhaustion, distress or shutdown at home. Attendance figures therefore do not always show the full extent of the barriers they are experiencing.

Children and young people may show different parts of their experience in different settings. School and home observations are both important.

Children and young people may not always be able to explain what is wrong. They might not yet understand their feelings, have the words to describe them or feel safe and confident enough to share them.

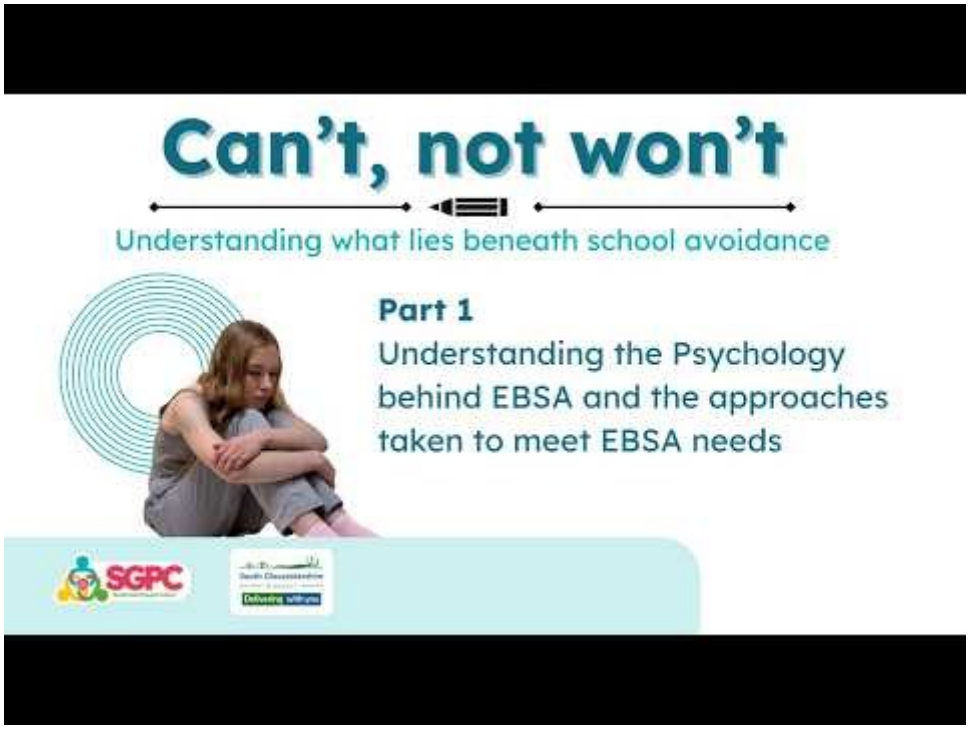
Any one of these signs may have a different explanation. It is helpful to look for changes and patterns:

- When does the distress happen?
- Are particular days, lessons, people, places or demands more difficult?
- What happens before and after school?
- When does your child seem more comfortable or able to engage?
- What appears to reduce or increase the distress?

Noticing and recording these patterns can help you, your child and the school begin to understand the barriers affecting attendance.

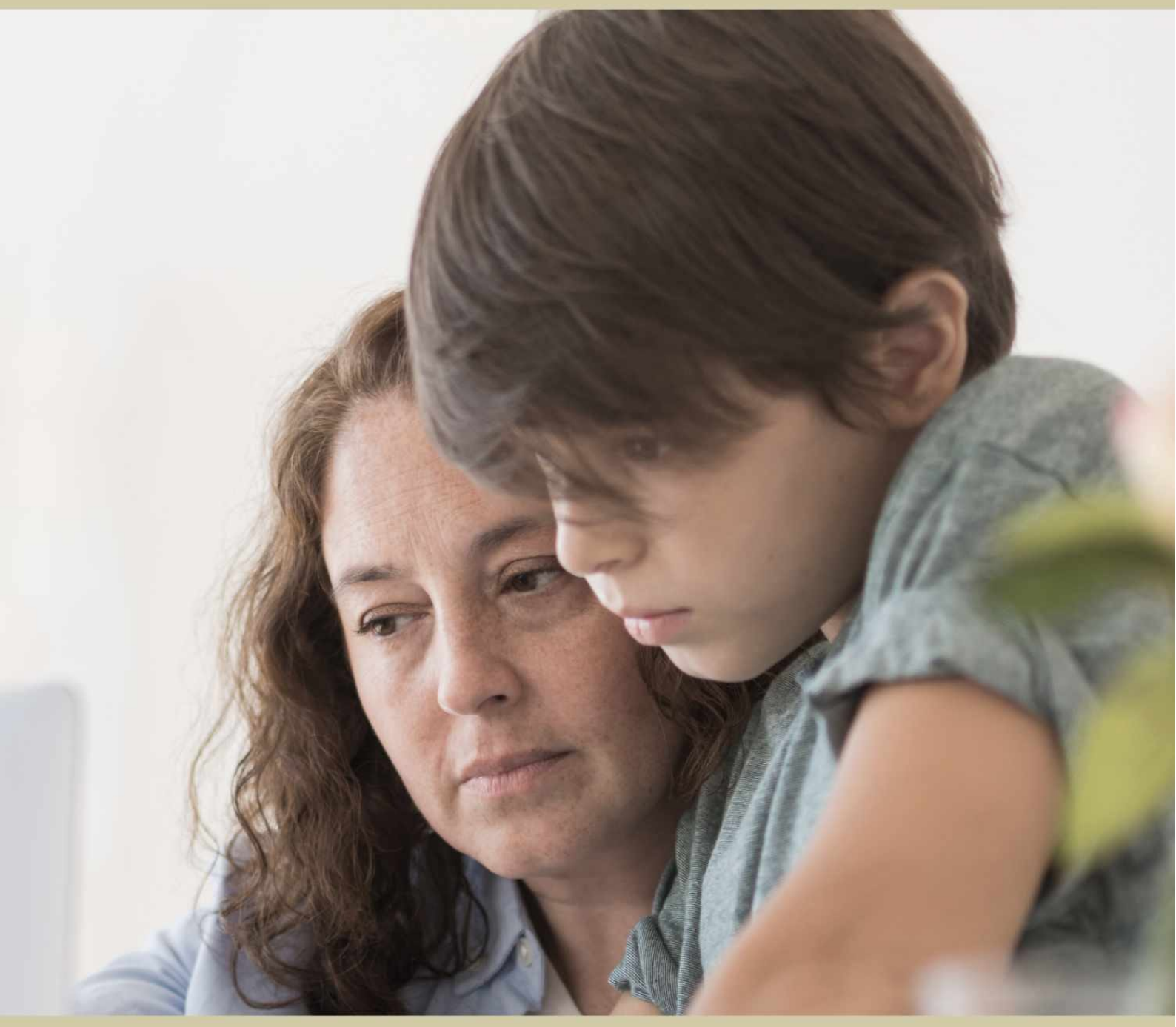
Find out more

Watch: **Understanding the psychology behind EBSA** from the **Can't not Won't series.** It was co-produced by South Gloucestershire Educational Psychology Service and their parent carer forum. The page allows parent/carers to select the section explaining EBSA rather than watch the whole video. ***Watch the video and access the handout***



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Exploring Barriers to Attendance

4. Exploring barriers to attendance

Section summary:

- There is rarely one simple reason for EBSA
- Many barriers may be making attendance difficult, and these can build up over time
- Children and young people may communicate distress through their behaviour, their bodies or changes in what they can manage, not only through words
- Exploring barriers should feel curious and supportive, not like an interrogation
- Understanding what helps is just as important as understanding what feels difficult
- A child or young person should not have to provide a complete explanation before support is offered

Understanding the barriers

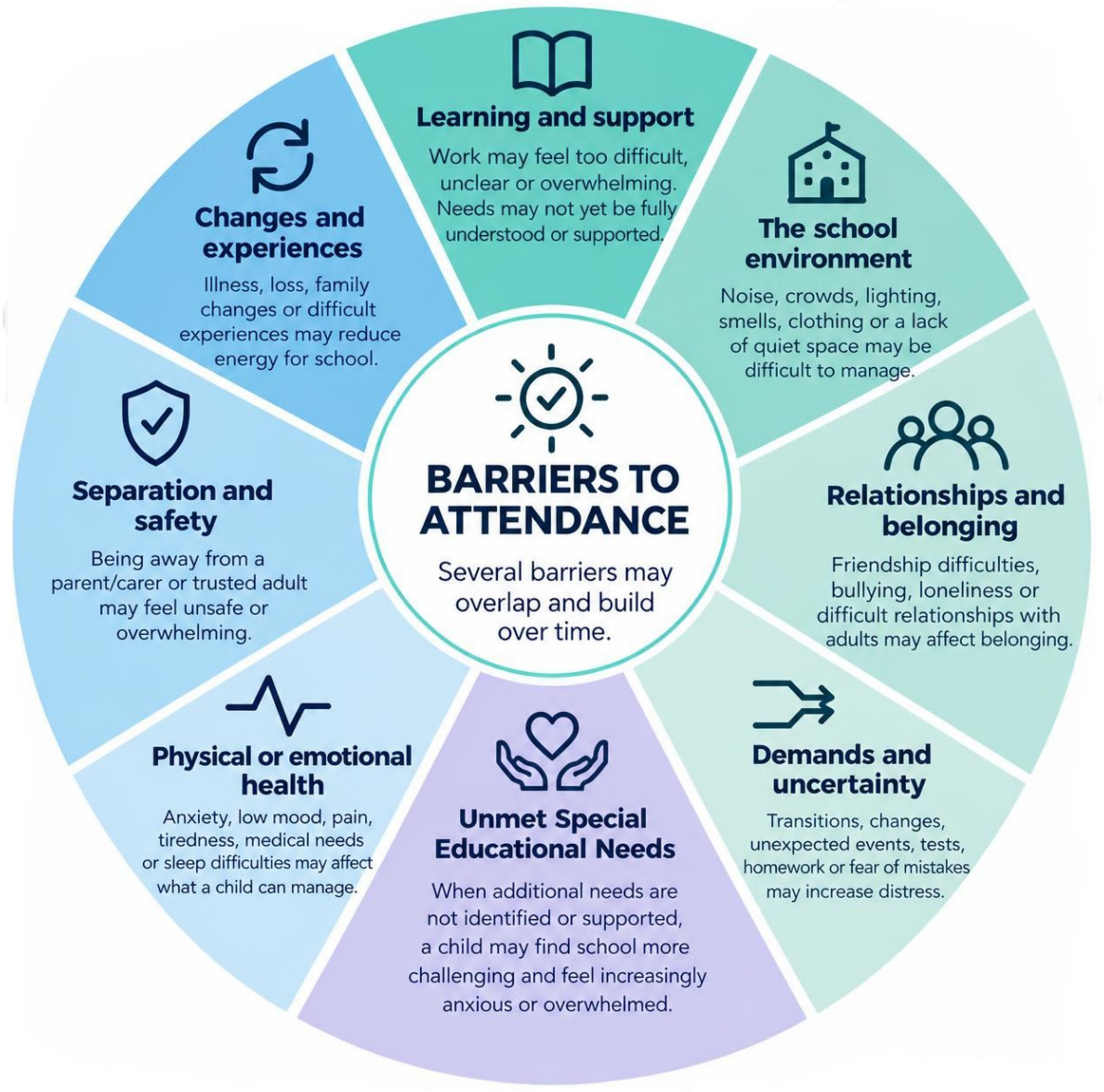
A barrier is anything that makes it harder for a child or young person to attend school, take part in lessons or feel safe and able to learn.

When a child or young person is experiencing EBSA, it is natural to look for one reason why this is happening. Sometimes there is a clear starting point, such as bullying, illness, a change of school or the loss of an important relationship. Often, many things are making school difficult, and these can build up over time.

Barriers relate to:

- Learning and support
- The school environment
- Relationships and belonging
- Demands and uncertainty
- Unmet Special Educational Needs
- Physical or emotional health

- Separation and safety
- Changes and experiences



These barriers are often connected. For example, a noisy classroom may make it harder for a child to follow instructions. They may then worry about getting the work wrong or being noticed by others. Over time, they may begin to connect that lesson, or school more generally, with distress.

The aim is not to decide whether the difficulty comes from the child, home or school. It is to build a fuller picture of what is happening and identify what could change.

Looking at what has changed

It may help to think about four questions:

What may have been building up over time?

This could include learning needs, sensory differences, health needs, friendship difficulties, anxiety or repeated experiences of feeling misunderstood.

What was happening when attendance started to become harder?

There may have been a transition, illness, friendship change, difficult lesson, change in staffing, period of absence or another important experience.

What is making attendance difficult now?

Once EBSA has developed, new barriers can appear. These may include worry about returning, missed learning, changes in routine, uncertainty about what will happen or pressure to attend before the right support is in place.

What helps?

Trusted relationships, predictable routines, reduced demands, reasonable adjustments, access to a quieter space or changes to the school day may help a child or young person feel safer and more able to engage.

Understanding what is different on a more manageable day can provide important clues about the support your child needs.

Learning from your child's experience

Your child's experience is central to understanding what is making school difficult. However, children and young people may not always know why they feel distressed or have the language or confidence to explain it.

They may:

- Find it difficult to recognise or describe their emotions
- Need more time to understand and respond to questions
- Find talking face to face uncomfortable
- Worry that adults will become upset, disappointed or try to make them attend

- Communicate through their behaviour, body, actions or changes in what they can manage

Not talking does not mean that nothing is wrong. Your child should not have to provide a complete explanation before support is offered. Adults can begin with what is already known, remain curious and continue building their understanding over time.

Your knowledge matters too. You may notice distress, exhaustion or changes in behaviour that are not seen at school. Sharing these observations can help develop a fuller picture of your child's experience.

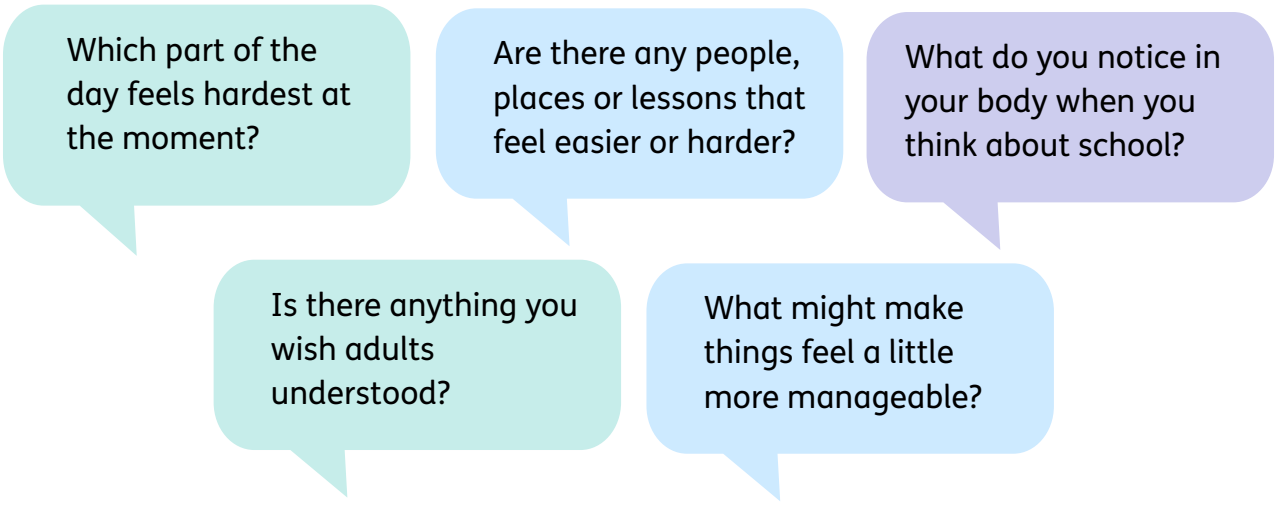
Making it easier to share

Choose a time when your child feels relatively calm and there is no immediate pressure to attend school or solve the problem. Keep questions short, allow plenty of time and try not to repeat the same question if they are unable to respond.

Instead of asking:

"Why won't you go to school?"

Try choosing one gentle, specific question:



These questions are prompts, not a checklist. Asking several questions at once may feel overwhelming.

You can also gently describe what you have noticed without assuming that you know the reason:

"I've noticed that Sunday evenings seem especially hard. I wonder if thinking about Monday might be part of it. You do not have to talk about it now. You can tell me, write it down or show me another time."

Your child may still not be ready or able to respond. Let them know that you can return to the conversation later, while remembering that repeated invitations can begin to feel like pressure.

Modelling emotional language

Children and young people are still developing their understanding of emotions. Some may find it difficult to recognise what they are feeling, notice sensations in their body or connect their feelings with what is happening around them.

Talking briefly about your own everyday emotions can show that feelings are normal and provide an example of how they might be described.

For example:

"I felt nervous before my meeting today. I noticed that my stomach felt tight, and going over my notes helped me feel more prepared."

This gently models:

- What happened
- The emotion
- How it felt in the body
- What helped

Keep examples brief and manageable. Avoid sharing worries that might make your child feel responsible for supporting you. You do not need to follow the example with a question. Allowing it to stand on its own can reduce pressure.

Psychoeducation means helping children and young people understand emotions and how they can affect the body, thoughts and actions. Pictures, stories, videos, emotion wheels and body maps can support this understanding without requiring your child to explain their own experience straight away.

These resources should be offered as options, rather than becoming another task or test.

- **Emotion wheel for children from Mentally Healthy Schools**
  Designed for children aged 4 to 11 who may find it difficult to identify or express their feelings
- **Let's Talk About Anxiety from Anna Freud**
  An animation helping young people aged 11 to 13 understand anxious feelings, with accompanying guidance for parent/carers
- **Practical tools included at the end of this guide**

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What can help at home

5. What can help at home?

Section summary:

- What might be happening
- What can help in the moment
- Making space for recovery
- Finding a manageable next step
- Recognising when pressure is not helping

Parent/carers often know more than anyone about what helps their young person feel safe, understood and able to cope. There is no single right response to EBSA, and what helps may change.

Support at home can provide safety, recovery and connection, but parent/carers cannot be expected to resolve EBSA alone. When barriers relate to school, home and school need to work together to understand and address them.

The central idea

When stress becomes greater than a young person can manage, thinking, communicating and making decisions become much harder. They may first need support to feel safer and regain some capacity. Afterwards, they may need time to recover. A manageable next step can be considered when they are more able to think and accept support.

What might be happening?

What a young person can manage may change across the day and from one day to another. Tiredness, health, sensory or social demands, uncertainty, difficult experiences and how safe and supported they feel can all make a difference.

When things become too much, a young person may become overwhelmed. This might look like panic, anger, crying, physical symptoms or trying to escape. They may instead shut down and become quiet, withdrawn or unable to speak or begin something.

These responses are not deliberate choices. Being quiet or compliant does not always mean that a young person is coping.

The window of tolerance

The window of tolerance is one way of understanding how much stress or challenge a young person can manage at a particular time. When they move outside their window, they may become overwhelmed or shut down, making it harder to think, communicate and accept support.

A young person's window can change across the day and from one day to another. The **My window of tolerance tool** (See appendix) can help explore what this looks like for them and what might help.



The Window of Tolerance – Beacon House is a short animation explaining why thinking and communicating can become harder during overwhelm or shutdown.

The animation was created with young people who have experienced trauma in mind, but the model can help us think more broadly about responses to stress.

What can help when a young person moves outside their window?

Parent/carers may also feel overwhelmed or unsure what to do and may need support themselves.

When a young person moves outside their window of tolerance and becomes overwhelmed or shuts down, thinking, communicating and making decisions become much harder.

At this point, the aim is not to solve the difficulty, discuss attendance or encourage them to push through. The immediate priority is to reduce additional pressure and help them feel safe and supported.

Depending on the young person, you could:

- Stay nearby or offer quiet and physical space
- Use fewer words and give one piece of information at a time
- Reduce noise, questions or other demands where possible
- Make what will happen next clearer
- Offer one or two simple, genuine choices
- Return to the conversation later

You might say:

"You don't need to explain right now. I'm here. We can work out what happens next later."

Some young people want closeness or reassurance. Others need quiet or space. Staying available without repeatedly approaching or questioning them can also be supportive.

There is no perfect response. Parent/carers may also feel overwhelmed or unsure what to do, and may need support themselves.

Using a PACE model

If your young person is seeking reassurance, closeness or support, it can be helpful to use a PACE approach (Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity and Empathy). PACE is a relationship-based approach that helps young people feel safe, understood and connected. It encourages them to explore and make sense of their thoughts, feelings and experiences without fear of judgement.

Playfulness	Acceptance	Curiosity	Empathy

Key Principles of PACE:

Playfulness

- A light-heated, relaxed and playful attitude can help reduce tension and strengthen connection. Playfulness is not about making fun of a situation but instead it is about helping young people be more open to and experience positive connection.
- For example, this could involve using gentle humour or using a light tone of voice.

Acceptance

- Acceptance involves recognising and validating a young person's feelings. It communicates that all emotions are acceptable and understandable.
- For example: "I can see that school feels really difficult for you right now."

Curiosity

- Curiosity is about trying to understand what may be happening beneath the surface, without making assumptions or rushing to solutions. Using a calm, curious tone can help.
- For example, "I wonder what part of today feels hardest?"

Empathy

- Empathy involves communicating understanding and compassion for a young person's experience.
- For example, "That sounds exhausting. No wonder you're finding it difficult."

PACE is not about removing expectations or solving problems immediately. Instead, it helps young people feel emotionally safe enough to communicate their

experiences, accept support and maintain trusting relationships with the adults around them. This sense of safety and connection can be an important foundation for recovery and for identifying manageable next steps.

Making space for recovery

Responding with PACE can help a young person feel safer and more understood when they are overwhelmed. However, feeling calmer in the moment does not necessarily mean that a young person is ready to make a plan or manage another demand. Overwhelm can be exhausting, and recovery may take time.

School may also use a significant amount of physical, emotional, social or sensory energy. A young person may return home exhausted, tearful, irritable, withdrawn or unable to manage everyday requests. This may show how much effort it took to get through the day.

Recovery might involve:

- Rest or quiet
- Movement or time outside
- Food or a drink
- A familiar activity or interest
- Time with someone they trust
- Time alone while knowing support remains available
- Fewer demands for a while

A simple choice may be easier than an open question:

"Would company, quiet or help with something feel best?"

Recovery is a need, not a reward. A young person should not have to appear calm or complete tasks before being given time to recover.

How do we find a manageable next step?

Once a young person has had enough time to recover and is able to think or accept support, it may be possible to consider a next step together.

A manageable step may involve some uncertainty or discomfort, but should not repeatedly move the young person far outside their window or lead to panic, shutdown or prolonged recovery.

A step may become more manageable by:

- Making it smaller or shorter
- Making it more predictable
- Changing the timing
- Reducing sensory or social demands
- Involving a trusted person
- Agreeing how the young person can pause or leave
- Allowing recovery afterwards

What is manageable may change from one day to another. This does not mean that the young person is being inconsistent or choosing not to cope.

The aim is not to widen their window by repeatedly exposing them to an environment that remains unsafe, overwhelming or inaccessible. Sometimes the environment or support must change before a step towards attendance becomes manageable.

When pressure is not helping

When a young person is struggling to attend, it is understandable that you may try questioning, persuading, repeated reassurance, rewards or consequences in the hope that something will help.

These responses can sometimes become part of an anxiety cycle. Pressure may increase the young person's sense of threat, while avoiding everything difficult may bring immediate relief without resolving the barriers underneath. This can leave families feeling caught between forcing the young person and removing every expectation.

Compassionate boundaries offer another approach. They involve working with the young person: acknowledging their experience, keeping an important need or gentle structure, and adapting how it is met.

For example:

"I can see that getting started feels difficult. We're going to keep a gentle shape to the morning. Would breakfast or getting dressed feel easier first?"

Reducing pressure does not mean giving up on education. However, attendance should not be presented as a simple non-negotiable while significant barriers remain unresolved.

If an approach repeatedly leads to panic, shutdown, conflict or prolonged recovery without making attendance more manageable, the plan, support or environment may need to change.

The **Compassionate boundaries** sheet explains the anxiety cycle and the difference between doing something to, for and with a young person in more detail.

Questions to consider

- What are the young person's signs of overwhelm or shutdown?
- What helps them feel safer or able to accept support?
- What do they need to recover?
- Which challenges currently feel manageable?
- Which demands repeatedly lead to overwhelming distress?
- What could be adapted at home?
- What support or change is needed from school?

Understanding can develop gradually by noticing patterns together. You do not need to answer every question at once.

Try a practical tool

You do not need to understand everything at once. Over time, it may help to notice:

- What moving outside their window looks like
- What seems to increase or reduce distress
- What helps in the moment
- What supports recovery
- Which steps currently feel manageable
- Which demands repeatedly lead to overwhelm or shutdown

Share these patterns with school so that support and the environment can be adapted.

The practical tools at the end of this guide may help:

- **My window of tolerance** explores what being within or outside the window looks like at school and at home, and what may help

- **Compassionate boundaries** explores the anxiety cycle and how adults can provide structure without forcing

These tools can be completed through choosing, pointing, drawing, writing or with support from a trusted adult. They are intended to build shared understanding, not to measure effort or test whether someone is trying hard enough.

Find out more

- **Beacon House: The Window of Tolerance**
  A short animation illustrating overwhelm, shutdown and the role of supportive adults
- **Anna Freud: Seven ways to support children and young people who are worried**
  Ideas for understanding anxiety and making overwhelming situations more manageable
- **Practical tools included in this guide**

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Working effectively with school

6. Working effectively with school

Section summary:

- Home and school may see different parts of the young person's experience
- Parent/carers' knowledge should inform decisions about support
- Plans should include adjustments, manageable next steps and a backup plan
- Progress should be reviewed using wellbeing and access to education, not attendance alone

Working with school can feel difficult, particularly if your child appears to cope there but becomes distressed or exhausted at home. You may also feel that you have explained their needs many times without seeing enough change.



Children and young people may show different parts of their experience in different settings. School staff may notice what happens during lessons, transitions or social times, while you may see difficulties before school, distress after school or the time needed to recover. These observations are all important.

The aim is not to decide whose account is correct. It is to bring together:

- Your child's experience
- What you notice at home
- What school staff observe
- The child or young person's strengths and trusted relationships
- What already helps or makes some situations more manageable

Your child's perspective should be central, but they should not have to explain everything before support is offered. They may communicate by talking, writing, drawing, messaging, choosing from options or through a trusted adult.

You do not have to identify every barrier or arrive with a complete solution. Understanding can develop gradually as you, your child and school share what you notice, explore what may help and review support together.

Preparing for a helpful meeting

A meeting can provide space for home and school to share information, understand the barriers and agree what may help. It should not focus only on attendance figures or persuading the young person to attend.

Before the meeting, it may help to think about:

- What you and your child would most like school to understand
- Patterns you have noticed before, during or after school
- What appears to increase or reduce distress
- What your child finds more manageable
- Their strengths, interests and trusted relationships
- Any adjustments or support that have helped previously
- Questions you would like to ask

Ask who will coordinate support and who your main contact will be. You can also ask who needs to attend the meeting, what will be discussed and how your child's views will be included.

Your child should not have to attend a formal meeting or speak in front of adults for their perspective to be heard. They might contribute by:

- Attending for a short part of the meeting
- Meeting one trusted adult beforehand
- Writing, drawing or sending a message
- Completing one of the practical tools
- Asking a parent/carer or trusted adult to share their views

Where possible, agree with your child what can be shared, who it can be shared with and how they would like adults to talk about their experience.

The **What I notice at home** parent/carer observation sheet can help you record patterns before, during and after school, including what appears to increase

distress, what helps and how long recovery takes. You can use it to organise your thoughts before a meeting or share relevant observations with school.

You do not need to complete every part. The aim is to support shared understanding, not to gather evidence against your child or prove that their difficulties are real.

What should be agreed?

A helpful plan should be clear enough for everyone to understand what will happen, while remaining flexible if the young person's needs change.

It may include:



- Up to three immediate priorities
- The barriers that the support is intended to reduce
- Adjustments that will make school safer or more accessible
- What adults at home and school will do
- One manageable next step
- What support will be available before, during and after that step
- What will happen if the step cannot be managed
- How home and school will communicate
- When the plan will be reviewed

Adjustments and support should be in place before expectations increase. For example, if the plan involves entering through a quieter entrance or meeting a trusted adult, these arrangements need to be confirmed before the young person is expected to try the step.

A backup plan is not an expectation that the young person will fail. It makes difficult moments more predictable and helps adults respond calmly if the first plan cannot be managed.

The EBSA guidance for schools and professionals contains practical planning templates that can help home, school and the young person record what has been agreed.

Communication between home and school

Agreeing how communication will work can reduce uncertainty and prevent parent/carers from having to repeat the same information to several people.

It may help to agree:

- A named member of staff as the main contact
- How and when updates will be shared
- Who to contact if the plan changes or something is not working
- What information can be shared with other staff
- How contact will be maintained during periods of absence

Communication should be manageable for the family and focused on information that helps adults understand and support the young person. It should not become a daily source of pressure or focus only on whether they attended.

Agreeing shared language

It may help for the young person, home and school to agree simple language that adults will use during difficult moments. Hearing a consistent message can reduce uncertainty and prevent adults unintentionally giving conflicting information.

Agree:

- What adults will say
- What adults will avoid saying
- The manageable next step
- What support will be available
- What will happen if the step cannot be managed

For example:

"We can see that this feels difficult. You do not need to explain everything now. The plan is to try [agreed step] with [agreed support]. If that feels too much, we will use the backup plan and review what needs to change."

The young person should help shape this language wherever possible.

Reviewing what is working

Agree a review date when the plan is made. It can be helpful to check implementation early, so that missing adjustments or practical difficulties can be addressed before an unsuccessful plan continues for too long.

At each review, consider:

- Were the agreed adjustments put in place?
- What helped the young person feel safer or more able to engage?
- What increased pressure or distress?
- Is the next step still manageable?
- What does the young person think?
- Does the support or environment need to change?

A step not being manageable is useful information. It does not necessarily mean that the young person needs more persuasion, firmer consequences or the same plan repeated.

Looking beyond attendance



Attendance is important, but it should not be the only way progress is measured. Progress may also include:

- Feeling safer
- Improved wellbeing or recovery
- Developing trust and belonging
- Communicating needs
- Using agreed support
- Accessing more learning
- Taking part in planning
- Managing a previously difficult part of the day

These changes may show that support is helping, even before attendance increases.

When the plan is not working

If barriers continue despite adjustments and support, repeatedly increasing pressure or recreating the same return plan is unlikely to help. Adults may need to deepen their understanding, make further changes or involve additional services.

There may be times when concerns are not fully understood, decisions have not been explained or agreed support and adjustments are not put in place. You do not need to wait until the next planned review if your child is continuing to struggle.

You can:

- Ask which agreed actions have been completed and when the remaining actions will happen
- Share specific examples of support that has not been available and how this has affected your child
- Request an earlier review with the named contact, SENCO, pastoral lead or headteacher
- Ask for decisions, responsibilities and timescales to be recorded in writing
- Ask for written reasons if requested support or an adjustment is not agreed
- Keep copies of plans, correspondence and meeting notes
- Seek independent advice from Barnet SENDIASS
- Ask for the school's complaints procedure if concerns remain unresolved

Raising a concern or using a complaints procedure does not mean that you are unwilling to work with school. It is a way of asking for decisions to be explained and agreed actions to be carried out.

Practical tools included in this guide

- **What I notice at home** parent/carer observation sheet
- **My window of tolerance** to explain overwhelm, shutdown and helpful support
- **Compassionate boundaries** for shared language and backup planning

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When EBSA has become entrenched

7. When EBSA has become entrenched

Section summary:

- EBSA can become entrenched when distress and disconnection have continued over time and earlier support has not made attendance manageable
- This does not mean that the situation is permanent or that anyone has failed
- Recovery, felt safety and connection may need to come before expectations about returning
- Support should follow the young person's capacity rather than a fixed timetable
- Progress includes wellbeing, trust, relationships, curiosity and engagement, not attendance alone

When difficulties have become entrenched

For some children and young people, the barriers to attendance become so overwhelming that they are unable to access school for a prolonged period. They may be physically and emotionally exhausted, need significant time to recover or become distressed when school or returning is mentioned.

This is sometimes described as **entrenched EBSA**. It is not defined by a particular number of missed days. A young person may also be experiencing entrenched difficulties while attending occasionally or accessing only a small part of school.

At this stage, repeatedly encouraging attendance or setting return dates may increase distress and deepen the young person's sense that adults do not understand. A different approach may be needed.

Moving from Recovery to Rediscovery

Barnet's approach draws on the **Moving from Recovery to Rediscovery** (Holder, 2024) model. It supports families, schools and professionals to prioritise recovery,

rebuild trust and gently widen engagement over time. Although this framework tends to be used when children/young people are not attending school and are experiencing long term/entrenched EBSA, principles can also be helpful for children/young people who are still attending school during natural times of non-attendance e.g. during school holidays.

The five stages are:

- Respite and recovery
- Reducing the pressure
- Reconnecting through safe relationships
- Rediscovering curiosity
- Re-engagement with the world

These are not steps that must be completed in order. A young person may need support from more than one stage, remain at one stage for some time or return to an earlier stage when circumstances change. There are no fixed timescales.

Reducing pressure does not mean withdrawing education, relationships or professional support. It means changing how these are offered so that they do not add to the young person's distress.

Respite and recovery



When a young person is overwhelmed or depleted, the immediate priority is emotional and physical recovery. They may need a period in which demands are reduced and they are not repeatedly asked to explain what has happened or when they will return.

Support might include:

- Time to rest and recover from sustained stress
- Reduced questions, decisions and demands
- Predictable routines based around sleep, food, care and connection
- Access to activities that feel safe, familiar or regulating
- Support for health, wellbeing and unmet needs
- Regular contact between home, school and involved professionals

School contact should remain gentle and should not carry an expectation that the young person responds or returns. A brief message from a trusted adult may be more manageable than a phone call or meeting.

Reducing the pressure

Recovery may be difficult if the young person continues to experience daily pressure about attendance, schoolwork or returning by a particular date.

Adults may need to pause and reconsider:

- Attendance targets or return dates
- Repeated discussions about school
- Work being sent home without agreement
- Meetings the young person cannot currently access
- Consequences, rewards or comparisons with previous attendance
- Plans that repeatedly lead to panic, shutdown or prolonged recovery

School and parent/carers can use this time to revisit the barriers, seek professional advice where needed and consider what must change before wider engagement becomes manageable.

Any contact, learning or routine should be agreed around the young person's current capacity and reviewed without blame.



Reconnecting through safe relationships

A trusted relationship can provide a bridge back to learning, school and the wider world. Contact should initially focus on safety and connection rather than attendance.

This might involve:

- A short message, card or email from a trusted adult
- Contact at an agreed time and frequency
- Talking about an interest rather than school
- Seeing a trusted adult away from the busiest parts of school
- Gentle contact with a friend or peer, where this is wanted
- Being included in school life without pressure to take part

Ask the young person how they would prefer adults to communicate. They may choose talking, writing or typing, drawing, selecting from options or communicating through someone they trust. They may also say that they are not ready yet.

Contact should not depend on the young person replying. The aim is to communicate: *You still belong, and we have not forgotten you.*

Rediscovering curiosity

As the young person begins to recover, they may show more interest in activities, relationships or learning. This might begin with something small and unrelated to school.

Curiosity might be supported through:

- Interests, hobbies or creative activities
- Practical or interest-led learning
- Time outdoors or in the community
- An activity shared with a trusted person
- Flexible access to learning without testing or pressure
- Opportunities to make choices and experience success

Engagement may be brief or inconsistent at first. It should not immediately lead to increased demands. Showing interest, asking a question or trying something new can all be meaningful signs of recovery.

Re-engagement with the world

Re-engagement means gradually widening the young person's access to relationships, activities, learning and community life. Returning to school may form part of this, but it should not be the only measure of progress.

Possible steps might include:

- Leaving the house for a preferred activity
- Meeting a trusted adult
- Accessing learning in a different place or format
- Visiting school when it is quiet
- Spending time in a safe space at school
- Joining a chosen activity or part of a lesson

- Gradually widening time, places or relationships

Steps should be small, predictable and supported by the adjustments the young person needs. The plan should include how they can pause, leave or ask for help and what will happen if the step becomes overwhelming.

Progress is not a straight line. A young person may move forward, pause or need to step back to regain stability. This should guide changes to the plan rather than being treated as failure.

Recognising progress

Signs that recovery is developing may include:

- Reduced distress or shorter recovery time
- Feeling safer or more hopeful
- More energy for everyday life
- Greater trust in adults
- Communicating needs or preferences
- Reconnecting with an interest or relationship
- Engaging with learning or meaningful activity
- Managing a small step without becoming overwhelmed

A lack of increased attendance does not necessarily mean that no progress has been made.

School, parent/carers and involved professionals should review what is changing, what remains difficult and what support is needed next. The young person's perspective should be included in a way that is accessible to them.

The next section explains how education, attendance responsibilities and statutory support should be considered while a young person is unable to access school.

Find out more

- **EBSA and Barriers to Setting Attendance Guidance for Schools, Families and Professionals**
- **ACAMH: Caroline Bond and Jerricah Holder on EBSA**
  A discussion of recovery, flexibility and maintaining partnership when EBSA has become entrenched

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Attendance, education & your rights

8. Attendance, education and your rights

Section summary:

- Keep school informed about why your child cannot attend and ask how their absence is being recorded
- School should work with you and your child to understand and reduce the barriers
- An Education Welfare Officer could help review the situation and explain the attendance process
- A fine should not be an automatic response to EBSA
- A part-time timetable should be temporary, agreed and supported by a wider plan
- If your child is not receiving education they can access, Barnet may need to consider its Section 19 duty

This section provides a general overview of the current position in England. Decisions should always consider the individual circumstances of the child and family.

What should happen when EBSA affects attendance?

Your role as a parent/carer

Tell school when your child cannot attend and follow its usual absence-reporting process. Explain, as clearly as you can, whether the absence relates to emotional distress, physical or mental health needs or another barrier.

It is helpful to:

- Share what your child is finding difficult and what has already been tried
- Keep school updated when circumstances change
- Take part in meetings and support planning where you can
- Explain when a plan is increasing distress or is not manageable

- Keep copies of plans, emails, meeting notes and professional advice

Working with school does not mean that you must agree to a plan that repeatedly overwhelms your child. You can ask what adults will do differently and request that decisions are recorded in writing.

What you can expect from school

When attendance is becoming difficult, school is expected to work with you and your child to understand the barriers and agree how they will be addressed.

This should include:



- Listening to you and your child
- Addressing barriers within school
- Considering appropriate pastoral support, reasonable adjustments and SEND support
- Agreeing actions and reviewing whether they are helping
- Keeping the same member of staff involved where possible
- Recording absence accurately and explaining your child's attendance record
- Continuing to support education and connection during absence, working with Barnet or another provider where needed
- Working with Barnet and other services as the difficulties become persistent or severe

A written plan can help everyone understand what has been agreed, who is responsible and when the support will be reviewed. You can ask for agreed actions and decisions to be recorded.

A formal diagnosis is not required before school can explore your child's needs, provide support or consider whether reasonable adjustments are required.

When Barnet may become involved

Barnet Council may become involved when attendance difficulties continue, become severe or require support that school cannot provide alone.

Depending on the circumstances, Barnet may need to:

- Help school and the family understand and address the barriers
- Consider whether other services or formal support are needed
- Make sure any attendance action is individual and proportionate
- Consider the child's SEND, health and disability
- Consider whether it needs to arrange education under Section 19

Education Welfare Officers

An Education Welfare Officer (EWO) may become involved when attendance difficulties continue. Their role includes working with families and schools to understand what is affecting attendance, review the support already provided and help agree next steps.

They can also explain attendance records and any legal processes. An EWO becoming involved does not mean that a fine or other legal action has been decided.

Temporary part-time timetables

A shorter school day will not resolve EBSA if the underlying barriers remain unchanged. A part-time timetable is therefore not a standard response to EBSA.

It may sometimes help when a child can access some education but full-time attendance is not currently in their best interests. It should be temporary and form part of a wider support or re-engagement plan.

Before agreeing to a part-time timetable, ask:

- Which barriers is the timetable intended to address?
- What adjustments and support will be available when my child attends?
- What education and school contact will be available during the time away?
- How has my child's perspective and current capacity been considered?
- When will the timetable be reviewed?
- What will happen if it leads to overwhelm or prolonged recovery?

A part-time timetable should be agreed with parent/carers rather than imposed. It should have regular review dates and a proposed end date.

It must not be used to manage behaviour, operate as an informal exclusion or compensate for school being unable to meet a child's needs.

If your child is regularly arriving late, leaving early or missing lessons without a written agreement, ask whether an informal part-time timetable is operating and request a review.

If your child has an EHC plan, school should involve Barnet so that the provision in the plan can also be reviewed.

Alternative provision



A child should not be left without education because they cannot attend school. School should initially continue providing suitable education, adapted to what the child can meaningfully access.

Alternative provision is education arranged outside the usual school setting. It may be arranged by school or Barnet Council and might include individual or small-group teaching or online learning.

An EHC plan is not always required. Alternative provision may be temporary or form part of a wider plan to support education, recovery or re-engagement.

If alternative provision is suggested, you can ask:

- Why is it being considered?
- What teaching and support will be available?
- How will your child remain connected with school?
- How and when will the arrangement be reviewed?

The organisation arranging the provision remains responsible for checking that it is safe, suitable and of appropriate quality.

Find out more

- **Department for Education: Working together to improve school attendance**
  Guidance on attendance support, recording absence and legal action

- **Department for Education: Mental health issues affecting a pupil's attendance**
  Support where mental health is affecting attendance

- **Department for Education: Education for children with health needs who cannot attend school**
  Guidance about suitable education and Section 19

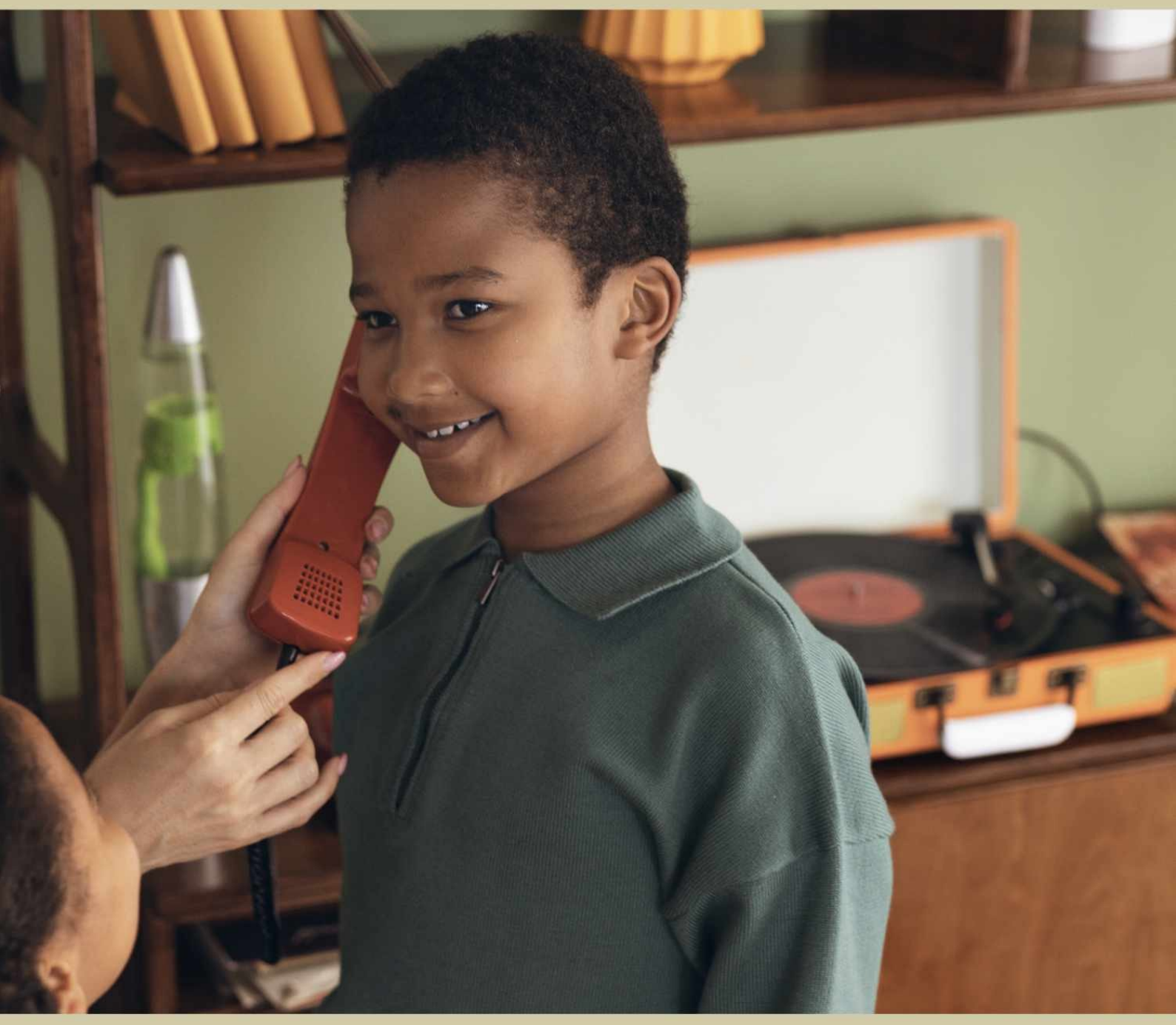
- **Barnet: School attendance**
  Barnet attendance information and local processes

- **Barnet SENDIASS**
  Free, confidential and impartial advice for parent/carers and young people

The next section explains what you can do when your child needs more SEND support than school is currently providing.

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When your child needs more SEND support

9. When your child needs more SEND support

Section summary:

- EBSA is not itself a special educational need, but attendance barriers may be connected to SEND
- A diagnosis is not required before school can identify needs or provide SEN Support
- Schools must consider reasonable adjustments for disabled pupils
- SEN Support should follow an Assess, Plan, Do, Review cycle

EBSA and SEND

Not every child experiencing EBSA will have special educational needs or a disability. However, difficulties with attendance may sometimes show that a child's needs are not yet fully understood or supported.

These might relate to:

- Communication and interaction
- Learning
- Social, emotional or mental health
- Sensory or physical needs

A diagnosis is not required for needs to be identified or for SEN Support to begin.

Reasonable adjustments

Under the Equality Act 2010, schools must make reasonable adjustments where a disabled pupil would otherwise be placed at a substantial disadvantage.

Disability has a legal meaning. It includes a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term effect on everyday activities. The focus is on the effect on the child rather than whether they have a particular diagnosis.

For a child experiencing EBSA, reasonable adjustments might include changes to:

- Arrival, transitions or the school day

- Sensory or environmental demands
- Communication and ways of participating
- Uniform, behaviour or attendance procedures
- Access to breaks, a safe space or a trusted adult

What is reasonable will depend on the child's needs and the school's circumstances. A school does not have to agree to every adjustment requested, but it should consider how the child is disadvantaged, what could reduce that disadvantage and explain its decision.

It can help to ask:

- What barrier or disadvantage are we trying to reduce?
- What adjustment will be made?
- Who needs to know about it?
- When will we review whether it is helping?

The **parent observation sheet** in this guide can help you record patterns and explain why an adjustment may be needed.

SEN Support

If your child may have special educational needs, ask to speak to the school's special educational needs coordinator, known as the SENCO.

Schools must use their best endeavours to make sure that pupils with SEN receive the support they need. This is usually organised through **SEN Support** using an Assess, Plan, Do, Review cycle:

- **Assess:** develop a shared understanding of strengths, needs and barriers
- **Plan:** agree outcomes, support, adjustments and a review date
- **Do:** put the agreed support in place
- **Review:** consider what is helping, what remains difficult and what needs to change

The child and parent/carers should be involved throughout.

A written SEN Support plan can help clarify:

- The needs being addressed
- What support and adjustments will be provided
- Who is responsible
- How often support will be available

- What progress will look like
- When the plan will be reviewed

Progress should not be measured through attendance alone. Reduced distress, improved access, communication of needs, engagement and recovery may also show whether support is helping.

If support is not helping, school should revisit its understanding of the barriers, adjust the plan and consider whether advice from other professionals is needed.

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Supporting yourself and your family

10. Supporting yourself and your family

Section summary:

- EBSA can affect the wellbeing and daily life of the whole family
- Looking after your wellbeing can help you remain available to support your child
- Plans should reflect what is realistic for your family
- Emotional, practical and professional support is available for parent/carers
- Siblings and other family members may also need understanding and support

The impact on parent/carers

Supporting a child experiencing EBSA can be emotionally and practically demanding. You may be managing distress before or after school, attending meetings, communicating with different professionals and trying to balance work, finances, caring responsibilities and the needs of other family members.

Parent/carers may experience:

- Worry about their child's wellbeing, education and future
- Guilt or fear that they are doing the wrong thing
- Frustration when support is delayed or plans are not helping
- Pressure from school, work, relatives or other people
- Exhaustion from managing repeated distress or disrupted routines
- Isolation from friends, family or other parent/carers
- Disagreement within the family about how to respond

These are understandable responses to a difficult situation. Needing support does not mean that you are failing your child.

Why your wellbeing matters



- Supporting a child experiencing EBSA can be exhausting, so looking after your own wellbeing matters too.
- This is not about placing responsibility for EBSA on you. School and involved professionals must continue working with your family to understand and address the barriers.
- Looking after yourself may mean noticing when you are becoming overwhelmed, asking for help or finding small opportunities to rest and recover. You do not need to feel calm all the time or get everything right.

Making plans manageable

An EBSA plan should reflect your family's circumstances, including work, health, finances, transport, caring responsibilities and the needs of other children. It should also be clear what each person or service has agreed to do.

Parent/carers should not be expected to take the place of school staff or other professionals.

You can ask:

- What am I being asked to do, and is this realistic for our family?
- Who is responsible for each part of the plan?
- Can one person coordinate communication between everyone involved?
- Can meetings be combined, held online or arranged at a manageable time?
- How will the plan be adjusted if any part is not manageable?

If the plan is becoming unmanageable, tell school or the professional coordinating it so that it can be reviewed. This is important information about the plan, not evidence that you are unwilling to engage.

Protecting your relationship

When EBSA is affecting everyday life, conversations can become dominated by attendance, schoolwork and what will happen next. This can place additional pressure on your relationship.

Where possible, it may help to:

- Make time for conversations and activities that are not about school
- Notice your child's effort, strengths and interests
- Agree when school-related conversations will happen
- Reduce repeated questions when they are overwhelmed
- Acknowledge difficult moments and reconnect afterwards
- Remind them that they are valued regardless of their attendance

You do not need to respond perfectly. Repairing the relationship after a difficult morning or conversation can be more important than getting everything right in the moment.

Supporting siblings and other family members

EBSA can also affect siblings and other people in the family. They may feel worried, confused, overlooked or frustrated by changes to routines and family life.

It may help to:

- Offer an age-appropriate explanation of what is happening
- Reassure siblings that they have not caused the difficulties
- Make clear that they are not responsible for solving the situation
- Create small opportunities for individual attention
- Listen to their feelings, including feelings that may be difficult to hear
- Ask their school or another trusted adult for support if needed

Family members may have different views about what should happen. Keeping the focus on the barriers, the child's needs and the agreed plan can help reduce blame.

Small ways to look after yourself

Advice about wellbeing can feel unrealistic when daily life is already overwhelming. Looking after yourself does not have to involve large changes.

Small steps might include:

- Telling someone you trust what is happening

- Accepting practical help with meals, shopping, transport or caring responsibilities
- Taking a short break when another trusted adult can provide support
- Protecting small parts of the day that are not focused on EBSA
- Writing down decisions and tasks so you do not have to hold everything in mind
- Keeping expectations for yourself realistic
- Speaking to your GP if stress, anxiety, low mood or exhaustion is affecting daily life



Choose what feels useful and manageable.

Where parent/carers can find support

You do not need to wait until the situation reaches crisis point before asking for help. Support may come from people already involved with your family or from services you can contact directly.

You could consider:

- Asking school whether a named member of staff, SENCO, pastoral lead or family support worker can help
- Asking whether Barnet Family Support (previously Child and Family Early Help) could provide practical or emotional support for the family
- Contacting Barnet Carers Centre if you provide unpaid care for a child with additional needs or a disability
- Speaking to your GP about your own physical or emotional wellbeing
- Referring yourself to NHS Talking Therapies if you are experiencing anxiety, stress or low mood
- Using a parent helpline, online information or peer support when you need someone outside the situation to talk to

Find out more

- **Barnet Early Help**
  Support for children, young people and families who may need additional help

- **Barnet Carers Centre**
  Advice and emotional and practical support for unpaid carers, including parent carers
- **Barnet and Enfield NHS Talking Therapies**
  NHS support for difficulties including anxiety, stress and low mood, with online self-referral
- **Coram Family Lives**
  Confidential information, advice and emotional support for families
- **Contact: support for families with disabled children**
  Information, advice and a Listening Ear service for parent carers
- **YoungMinds: parent support**
  Information and helpline support for parent/carers concerned about a young person's mental health
- **NHS Every Mind Matters**
  Online tools and practical guidance for managing stress, anxiety, low mood and sleep

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Barnet services & further help

11. Barnet services, guidance and further help

Section summary:

- You do not need to contact every service listed here
- School or another named professional should help you identify and coordinate appropriate support
- Barnet services can offer help with attendance, SEND, emotional wellbeing and wider family needs
- Independent organisations can provide additional information and advice
- Use the urgent support routes if someone may be at immediate risk

Where should I start?

The most appropriate starting point will depend on the support needed.

- For attendance records or an EBSA plan, speak to the named person at school
- For SEND support, speak to the SENCO or contact Barnet SENDIASS
- For wider family or practical support, ask about Barnet Family Support (previously Early Help)
- For emotional wellbeing or mental health support, speak to your GP or ask about BICS or CAMHS
- If several professionals are involved, ask who will coordinate communication
- If someone may be at immediate risk, use the urgent support routes below

You should not be expected to navigate services alone. School and involved professionals should help identify suitable support and explain any referral process.

Barnet services

- **Barnet: School attendance**
  Information about attendance, absence and local attendance processes
- **Barnet Early Help**
  Support for children, young people and families who may benefit from additional help
- **Make an Early Help request**
  Information about requesting support from Barnet's Early Help team
- **Best Start Family Hubs**
  Local activities, parenting advice and family support
- **BICS: emotional wellbeing and mental health support**
  Mental health and wellbeing support for children, young people and families in Barnet
- **Make a BICS referral**
  Referral information and the BICS support line: 020 8359 3130, Monday to Friday from 9am to 5pm
- **BICS online videos and workshops**
  Online resources about anxiety, sleep, transitions, emotional wellbeing and supporting children and young people
- **Young people's mental health services in Barnet**
  An overview of local mental health and wellbeing support
- **Barnet Local Offer**
  Information about education, health and social care services for children and young people with SEND
- **Barnet SENDIASS**
  Free, confidential and impartial SEND information, advice and support for parent/carers and young people

If help is urgent

BICS and the other general support services listed above are not emergency or crisis services.

- If someone is in immediate danger, call **999** or go to **A&E**
- For urgent mental health support, call **NHS 111** and select the mental health option

- The Barnet, Enfield and Haringey CAMHS Crisis Line is available 24 hours a day on **0800 151 0023**
- If you are worried that a child may be experiencing harm or abuse, contact **Barnet MASH** on **020 8359 4066**
- Outside MASH opening hours, contact Barnet's Emergency Duty Team on **020 8359 2000**

Independent information and advice

- **YoungMinds: school anxiety and attendance difficulties**
  Parent/carer guidance about understanding difficulties, working with school and finding support
- **IPSEA: school anxiety**
  Independent legal information about SEND and difficulties accessing education
- **National Autistic Society: attendance difficulties**
  Information for families of autistic children and young people experiencing barriers to attendance
- **Coram Family Lives**
  Confidential information, advice and emotional support for families
- **Contact**
  Information and support for families with disabled children and children with additional needs
- **The Bell Foundation: guidance for multilingual families**
  Information about learning and the English education system in 22 languages

Support children and young people can access

- **Childline**
  Free and confidential support for children and young people on **0800 1111**
- **Kooth**
  Free online mental health and wellbeing support for young people
- **Shout**
  Free, confidential, 24-hour text support for anyone in the UK who is struggling to cope. Text **SHOUT** to **85258**
- **Samaritans**
  Confidential emotional support at any time on **116 123**

National guidance

- **Department for Education: Working together to improve school attendance**
  Statutory guidance about attendance support and legal intervention
- **Department for Education: Mental health issues affecting a pupil's attendance**
  Guidance for schools where mental health is affecting attendance
- **Department for Education: SEND Code of Practice**
  Statutory guidance about SEND support and EHC plans
- **Department for Education: Education for children with health needs who cannot attend school**
  Statutory guidance about suitable education and local authority responsibilities
- **Department for Education: Equality Act 2010 advice for schools**
  Guidance about disability discrimination and reasonable adjustments
- **Department for Education: Keeping children safe in education**
  Current statutory safeguarding guidance for schools and colleges

Services and referral arrangements can change. Use the linked pages for the most up-to-date information or ask a professional already involved with your family to help you find the right route

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Appendix

12. Appendix

Practical tools in this guide

The appendices include tools that parent/carers, children, young people and schools can use together, including:

- Parent/carer observation sheets
- Compassionate boundaries sheet
- Window of Tolerance tool

Parent Observation Sheets

FOR PARENT/CARERS

What I notice at home

A gentle way to record patterns, questions and what seems to help

Child's name (optional)

Date or period I am thinking about

Use this when your child cannot or does not want to use the cards. Write what you notice, rather than trying to decide what it means. **Parent/carer observations add helpful context but do not replace your child's own communication**

Before school

The evening before, waking up, getting ready and leaving home

After school

Arriving home, later that evening and the following morning

What seems to use their energy

People, places, lessons, sensory experiences, changes, uncertainty or pressure

What appears to help

People, routines, adjustments, spaces, activities or recovery time

What my child has communicated

Words, messages, play, drawings, body language, actions or what they avoid

What I am unsure about

Questions, different possible explanations or things I would like help to understand

What I would like to explore with school

Patterns to share, questions to ask, and support or adjustments to consider

Preparing to share this with school

Use only the prompts that help. You do not need to share the whole sheet

The most important pattern I have noticed is...

What I would like school to understand is...

What my child would like adults to know is...
My main question is...
My child would prefer to contribute by...
Your child can contribute by talking, writing or typing, drawing, choosing from options, through someone they trust, or saying 'I am not sure yet'

Compassionate boundaries

Supporting without forcing or removing every challenge

When a young person is experiencing EBSA, even a small expectation can feel difficult to hold. Parent/carers may have seen requests lead to panic, shutdown, conflict or exhaustion and may be unsure whether a boundary will help or make things harder.

Why can boundaries feel difficult?

Parent/carers are trying to protect their child's wellbeing and their relationship while managing messages about attendance, routines and what they 'should' be doing. They can become caught between:

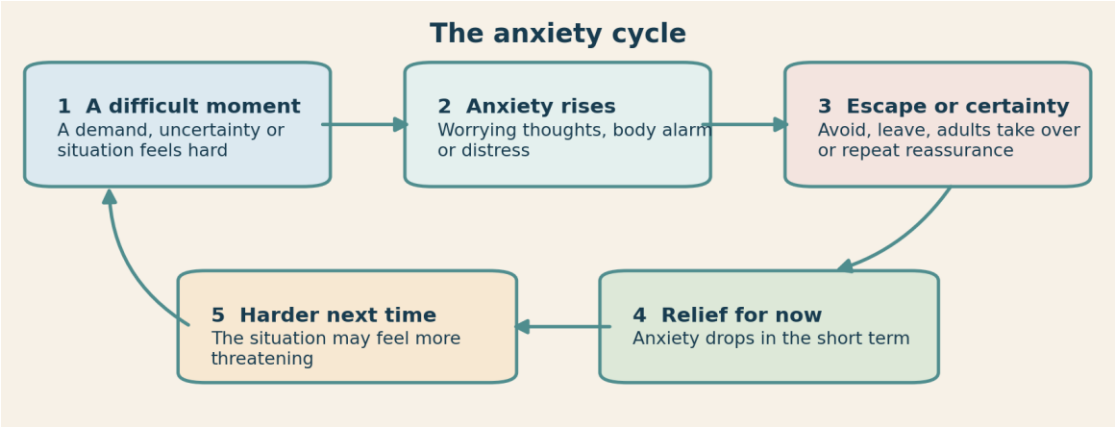
Increasing pressure: keeping the original demand and trying harder to make it happen

Removing every challenge: trying to prevent distress by taking away all uncertainty, decisions or expectations

Working with: understanding the distress, keeping what is genuinely important and adapting how it is reached

How anxiety can create a cycle

Anxiety naturally pulls us towards escape and certainty. Avoiding a difficult situation, removing a demand or receiving reassurance can reduce distress quickly. That relief is real, but it can sometimes make the same situation feel harder next time.



Repeated reassurance is not 'bad', and reducing demands may be essential during overwhelm, illness or recovery. The difficulty comes when immediate relief becomes the only plan and the barriers are never understood or changed.

Forcing is not the answer either. Pushing far beyond what a young person can manage can add threat, masking or shutdown and damage trust. Compliance does not show that the situation is safe or accessible.

The aim is safety, helpful adjustments and small supported successes, not no anxiety and not overwhelming distress.

Doing things to, for or with a young person

This is not about judging families. Adults may move between all three responses, particularly when they are worried, exhausted or managing an immediate risk. Doing more for a young person can be part of recovery. The question is whether they can gradually be included again when they are able.

Doing to	Doing for	Working with
Focus: The adult keeps the original outcome and increases pressure **Example:** "You have to get ready now. We are not discussing it." **Risk:** Compliance may hide overwhelm and leave barriers unchanged	**Focus:** The adult prevents distress by removing the challenge or taking over **Example:** "It is okay, I will sort everything. You do not need to think about it." **Remember:** This may be needed during overwhelm or recovery. If it becomes the only response, participation can narrow	**Focus:** The adult listens, keeps an important need and adapts how it is met **Example:** "I can see starting feels hard. Shall we begin with breakfast or getting dressed?" **Aim:** Predictability, influence, support and a manageable step

What is a compassionate boundary?

A compassionate boundary keeps an important need clear while remaining flexible about how it is met. It does not require the young person to hide their feelings or push through overwhelming distress.

Using a PACE approach

The PACE approach can be a helpful tool when setting compassionate boundaries. This approach (Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity and Empathy) allows young people to feel safe, understood and connected while adults maintain important boundaries and expectations. PACE helps adults understand what is driving a young person distress and work alongside them to find a manageable way forward.

- **Playfulness:** Use warmth, humour and a relaxed tone to reduce tension where appropriate.
- **Acceptance**: Acknowledge and validate the young person's feelings, even when a boundary remains in place.
- **Curiosity**: Wonder about what may be making the situation difficult rather than making assumptions.
- **Empathy**: Communicate understanding of the young person's experience and the effort involved.

A relatable morning example

Young person:

"I can't do this. I'm not getting ready."

Parent/carer:

"I can see getting started feels difficult. (Acceptance)

I wonder if something about today feels harder than usual?" (Curiosity)

Young person:

"I don't want to go. Everyone will be asking where I've been."

Parent/carer:

"That sounds really difficult. I can understand why that would feel worrying. I'm here and we will work it out together." (Empathy)

We are going to keep a gentle shape to the morning. Would breakfast or getting dressed feel easier first?"(Boundary and flexibility)

If neither is manageable: "Let's pause for ten minutes. I'll stay nearby, then we will use our backup plan."

The important need is some structure and care. The order, pace and level of support can change. The response does not promise that everything will feel fine, but it shows the young person that they will not face the difficulty alone.

Other examples

Communication: "You do not have to explain everything now. Would it be easier to text, write or talk after dinner?"

An agreed school step: "Today's plan is a ten-minute check-in with Sam, at the gate or in the quiet room. If it is too much, we will use the phone check-in and review."

Attendance is not a simple non-negotiable while significant barriers remain unresolved. The environment, plan or support may need to change before an attendance step is manageable.

How can I use a boundary safely?

1	**Check the purpose.** Is this about safety, health, connection or necessary structure, or mainly about gaining compliance?
2	**Choose the moment and acknowledge.** Plan together when things are calmer. During distress, use fewer words: "I can see this feels difficult"
3	**State the need.** Use one clear sentence: "We are going to keep a gentle shape to the morning"
4	**Adapt how.** Offer one or two genuine choices about timing, order, place, communication or support
5	**Use a backup plan and review.** Explain what happens if the first step becomes too much, then consider what adults need to change

Reassurance without getting stuck

Warmth and reassurance are important. Repeatedly trying to remove all uncertainty can briefly lower anxiety and then leave the young person needing the same reassurance again. Connection, honesty and a clear plan may help more.

Instead of: "I promise everything will be fine."

Try: "I know this feels uncertain. We cannot know exactly how it will go, but you will not be facing it alone. We have a plan and a backup plan."

When should adults pause and review?

A boundary or plan may need to change if it repeatedly:

- Leads to panic, shutdown, prolonged recovery or a repeated power struggle
- Relies on skills the young person cannot currently access
- Ignores health, SEND, sensory, communication or relational needs
- Requires an unsafe or inaccessible environment, or creates distress without supported success

This does not mean the parent/carer has failed. It provides information about what the young person can manage and what adults or environments need to do differently.

Compassionate boundaries should never involve physical force, shame, threats, withdrawal of comfort or making food, rest, regulation, connection or support conditional on compliance.

Agree shared language with school

A short script agreed with the young person, home and school can reduce mixed messages. Agree what adults will say, the manageable next step, the support available and the backup plan.

> **"We can see this feels difficult. You do not need to explain everything now. The plan is to try [agreed step] with [agreed support]. If that feels too much, we will use [backup plan] and review what needs to change."**

Window of Tolerance Tool

Understanding my window

Everyone has a window of tolerance. It helps us understand what our mind and body can manage at one time.



Everything feels too much

My mind or body may go into high alert.

panicky | angry | restless | tearful | need to get away



Things feel manageable

I may still feel worried, uncomfortable or tired, but I can think, communicate, connect or do some things.

okay | interested | able to think | able to talk | connected



I feel shut down

My mind or body may slow down to protect me.

blank | far away | exhausted | stuck | unable to respond



I can move between these places.
Where I am can change during the day.

None of these feelings are wrong.
They give us clues about what I may need.

Next: I can show where I am right now. →

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Exploring my window at different moments

How I feel can change in different places, with different people and at different times.

1. Make your own key below
2. Circle a moment in the colour that fits
3. Circle the feelings that fit



Make your own key

I will use this colour ☐ to show "Everything feels too much"
I will use this colour ☐ to show "Things feel manageable"
I will use this colour ☐ to show "I feel shut down"

Everything feels too much	Panicky	Angry	Tearful	Restless	Need to get away	Something else	Something else
Things feel manageable	Okay	Interested	Able to think	Able to talk	Connected	Something else	Something else
I feel shut down	Tired	Blank	Stuck	Far away	Hard to respond	Something else	Something else

The same moment may feel different on different days.
Feelings can fit in more than one part. There are no right or wrong answers.

Page 2 of 4

Exploring my window at home

How I feel can change at home, at different times and when school is talked about.

1. Make your own key below
2. Circle up to three moments in the colour that fits
3. Circle the feelings that fit



Make your own key

I will use this colour ☐ to show "Everything feels too much"
I will use this colour ☐ to show "Things feel manageable"
I will use this colour ☐ to show "I feel shut down"

Everything feels too much	Panicky	Angry	Tearful	Restless	Shaky	Something else	Something else
Things feel manageable	Okay	Interested	Able to talk	Able to think	Connected	Something else	Something else
I feel shut down	Tired	Blank	Stuck	Far away	Unable to respond	Something else	Something else

The same moment may feel different on different days.
Feelings can fit in more than one part. There are no right or wrong answers.

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What might help me in these moments?

Use the colours from my key on page 2. Circle what might help in each moment.
I can use more than one colour around the same picture.
I do not have to explain my choices.

1 What might help in the moment?



2 How can I show what I need?



3 What might help afterwards?



What helps can be different in different moments.
Adults can use this page to listen and make a plan with me.

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