

## EBSA Interventions

### Whole School Approaches

School plays a key role in the identification of children and young people who are currently experiencing or are at risk of EBSA. It is important for schools to develop effective whole school systems to take preventative measures towards EBSA, with a focus on early intervention and prevention. This is a list of some activities and interventions schools can implement to promote resilience, belongingness, emotional literacy skills and secure attachments.

To be effective, whole school approaches, such as those below, must be in place across the school. This means all pupils, staff (including non-teaching staff), management and the wider school community must understand what this means, how they should do this and have received the appropriate and ongoing training and development.

- ✓ **EBSA Risk Screening Tool** can be utilised to identify and maintain robust oversight of children and young people who are vulnerable. It can be used to share with SENCo's, EBSA and Mental Health leads and pastoral leads, allowing them to make assessments of underpinning needs and put appropriate adjustments or support and interventions in place at the point they first arise.
- ✓ **EBSA Setting Self Audit Tool** can be used to think about how your school meets the needs of children and young people who are at risk of developing EBSA at the whole system level to reduce the likelihood of EBSA developing or escalating. The tool should be used as part of whole school development planning and revisited at regular points to monitor the ongoing developments.
- ✓ **Sensory Issues** can play a large role in school avoidance. Further resources, strategies, training and advice can be accessed by contacting the Working Together Team. Resources such as a sensory audit tool should be considered as a useful way of ensuring that your school environment meets needs commonly associated with school avoidance.
- ✓ **PACE Model** is a way of thinking, feeling, communicating and behaving that helps a child or young person to feel safe. It helps to promote secure attachments and enables a child or young person to reflect on their thoughts and behaviours without being judged. Supporting a child or young person's self-awareness, emotional intelligence and resilience through effectively de-escalating conflict and increasing a child or young person feeling understood. The principals of PACE are:
  - Playfulness:
  - Acceptance:
  - Curiosity:
  - Empathy:

- ✓ **Restorative Practice** is an approach that offers a framework to build upon existing good practice. It provides settings with a range of practices which promote mutually respectful relationships to address behaviour, conflict, bullying and absences and builds community cohesion. There is a wealth of evidence that shows how the use of restorative approaches alongside Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL), helps to develop more resilient and self-regulating learners, thus creating positive learning environments.

Many children and young people who experience EBSA have experienced bullying or a breakdown of relationships with peers or teachers. A restorative school is one which takes a restorative approach to resolving conflict and preventing harm. Restorative approaches enable those who have been harmed to convey the impact of the harm to those responsible, and for those responsible to acknowledge this impact and take steps to put it right.

- ✓ **THRIVE Framework** is an integrated, person centred, and needs led approach to supporting children and young people's social and emotional development. Their whole school approach to wellbeing has evidence that supports its ability to improve attendance, behaviour and attainment.

The Framework is needs-led with the emphasis placed on prevention and promotion of mental health and wellbeing through a multi-agency holistic focus that empowers children and their families through their active involvement in decision making. The Framework also recognises fluctuating needs and the importance of early intervention and getting the right support at the right time that enables the development of robust resilience.

- ✓ **Emotional Literacy** is a term used to describe skills that underpin emotional regulation, including recognising emotional states, understanding and labelling emotions, being able to express our emotional experiences to others and regulating our bodily responses to emotions.

PSHE sessions should focus on these elements of emotional literacy, but could be extended into ordinarily available provision for children who may need more targeted support. Investing in training for staff to lead on emotional literacy skills may have a positive impact for children and young people at risk of becoming EBSA as it focusses on the management of the uncomfortable feelings that elicit avoidance behaviour. ELSA (Emotional Literacy Support Assistant) intervention was designed to build the capacity of schools to support the emotional needs of their pupils from within their own resources. This is achieved by training teaching assistants to develop and deliver individualised support programmes to meet the emotional needs of children and teenagers in their care. It recognises that children and young people learn better and are happier in school if their emotional needs are also addressed.

- ✓ **Trauma informed practice** is a strength-based framework. It focuses on effective responses to the impact of trauma on children and young people through consistent and predictable strategies that emphasise the importance of relating to the experiences of others. It aims to increase practitioners' awareness of how trauma can negatively impact on individuals and communities, and their ability to feel safe or develop trusting relationships. Trauma informed practice acknowledges the need to see beyond an child or young person's presenting behaviours and to ask, 'What does this person need?' rather than 'What is wrong with this person?'
  
- ✓ **Emotional Coaching** is based on the principle that nurturing and emotionally supportive relationships provide optimal contexts for the promotion of children's outcomes and resilience. It uses moments of heightened emotion and resulting behaviour to guide and teach the child and young person about more effective responses. Through empathetic engagement, the child's emotional state is verbally acknowledged and validated, promoting a sense of security and feeling 'felt'. This activates changes in the child's neurological system and allows the child to calm down, physiologically and psychologically.

## Universal and Targeted Approaches

The interventions that could be used will greatly depend on the specific needs of the child or young person and the nature of the issues identified through the phases of the EBSA Pathway. Any provision that is put in place should not be considered a long-term solution but a bridge towards eventual reintegration. Continued assessments to ensure appropriate provision is in place is key. While not an exhaustive list, here are some potential interventions or adjustments:

➤ **Checking and doing the basics:**

For example:

- Getting enough sleep
- Eating healthfully
- Exercising
- Going on walks
- Connecting with people the CYP loves and/or trusts, including trusted adults at school.

➤ **Interventions and adjustments:**

For example:

- Targeted interventions on key areas of difficulty
- Revision of instructional practices
- Revision of how the information is presented and delivered
- Differentiated learning approaches
- Adjusted expectations in line with emotional needs
- Allowing a child to start a few minutes earlier or later than their class
- Change of classes / form group
- Appropriate positioning within the class to reduce the impact of sensory needs
- Allowing a child to sit with a child they have an established relationship with
- Phased return starting with favourite / least challenging lesson or time of the day, starting small and building up; for example 15 minutes if a whole lesson is too much
- Not taking part in an activity or lesson which has been identified as particularly stressful until the child is more able to cope (through intervention or support)
- Quality first teaching (differentiated learning, extra check-ins with pupil)
- Safe spaces for time out when a child is overwhelmed. Also for start of day so don't have to wait outside.
- Adjustments for child to avoid trigger points: such as ability to leave lesson 5 minutes early (with teacher aware so don't have to draw attention to themselves), ability to go into classroom as soon as arrive to avoid lining up outside, canteen pass to avoid queue, time out card, toilet pass, late pass.
- Medical card with agreed adjustments to show cover teachers to avoid having to explain themselves

- All staff aware of adjustments for consistency and to avoid negative challenge
- Lunch time clubs away from the busy playground
- Named adults in school for children to talk to about their worries
- Social inclusion provision such as buddying, peer mentoring and structured play
- Option for students not attending to come in at unstructured times to meet with friends in private space to maintain friendship links.
- Friendly emails sent from teaching staff/form tutor to maintain links and let the student know they are being thought of, missed and not in any trouble for being absent
- Reduce expectations of amount of work or subjects being studied
- After school tour of school to familiarise students with the school building
- A booklet of photos of the school and all key areas and members of staff shared with the student
- Student invited in the day before term starts to see new timetable, meet with pastoral staff and familiarise themselves with the building and their classroom/s
- Timetable changes shared in advance
- Student not asked to read aloud or contribute in front of class; let them volunteer / put their hand up
- Regular check ins to review goals, support and adaptations. Also as part of 1-1 mentoring
- Notebook for student to write down worries as they occur to then be discussed with key adult at agreed time or post-its so that when the worry is shared and addressed the student can 'throw the worry away'
- Use of resources such as noise cancelling headphones or fidget toys
- Targeted learning interventions (for example, literacy small group work)
- Social skills intervention groups
- Nurture groups or ELSA intervention
- Specific sessions on anxiety management/relaxation techniques
- Key adult to develop a relationship with the child and scaffold their access to challenging situations
- Adjusted timetable to support access to social activities to build up friendships and sense of belonging
- Using a discrete part of the school (for example, learning support base or other) for the child to access direct teaching
- Sending work home with detailed explanation of activities and expectations for completion
- Using google classroom or similar to deliver the above where there is appropriate technology available at home and the child can access it. Allows student to hear teacher explanations and familiarise themselves with the noise of the classroom again. Build up from no expectation to have video or microphone on

- Lesson resources published daily on sharepoint pages so students can still access when absent
  - Child encouraged to pop into school for a few minutes to return completed work and collect marked work to maintain links with school
  - Homework set via an app so students can still see and complete when absent
  - 'Face-to-face' online teaching sessions individually or in small groups
  - Meeting the child at home to teach or provide emotional support
- **Reduced Timetables** should only every be considered as part of a time-limited phased return to full-time school provision and if it is in the best interests of the child or young person. Any longer-term arrangements relating to reduced hours can only be considered due to recognised medical needs. A reduced timetable cannot be implemented without written agreement from the parent/carers.

A reduced timetable **will not** resolve the EBSA itself. There must be clear planned steps towards reintegration that are based on what the child or young person finds difficult. Not just a reduction in the number of hours in school.

In relation to children or young people experiencing EBSA, a reduced timetable *might* be useful as a period of rest and recovery from significant anxiety. However, it should only be put in place as part of a wider strategy of support, with appropriate assessment and planning continuing to take place to understand what is contributing to their anxiety and their EBSA. It *might* also be useful as a reasonable adjustment, allowing the child or young person to avoid lessons or elements of the school day they find particularly challenging. Again, during this time, it is crucial to continue developing an understanding of the further support and provision that needs to be in place to enable the child or young person to reintegrate into school, or long term adjustments.

- **Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)** is a type of therapy focused on identifying and adjusting negative patterns of thought and behaviour. Low-intensity CBT is delivered over a shorter duration or in a less intense form than traditional CBT, such as short sessions with a knowledgeable Emotional Literacy Support Assistant or school counsellor. For children and young people with Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA), this could involve identifying negative or distorted beliefs about school, themselves and the 'world' and learning strategies to manage these thoughts. Beliefs are powerful at shaping perception and action, constructing emotions, and seeking support at school.
- **Graded Exposure:** gradually exposes the individual to the situation they fear in a controlled and safe way. For EBSA, this could mean initially just visiting the school grounds when it's quiet, then slowly building up to spending short, then longer periods at school until they can

manage a full day. It relies on the process of habituation to gradually develop tolerance of increasingly challenging situations.

Habituation is a very simple and universal form of learning. It is when your central nervous system reduces its response to a stimulus over time. In everyday terms you might think of it as 'becoming accustomed' to a situation or a stimulus. For example, you jump into a swimming pool, and it feels freezing at first but after a couple of minutes you stop noticing. Or, you are working in a room full of people and at first you can hear everything others are saying but over time you manage to 'tune it out'.

When designing a graded exposure plan, it is aiming for the initial fear/emotional response to a situation to habituate in a similar way to the simple sensory examples above. We want the child or young person to experience the relief of their intense feelings diminishing and, over time, for them to 'become accustomed' to reasonable levels of anxiety or sensory stimulation.

Habituation can occur naturally through repeated exposure to a situation or stimulus. However, it is important to know that some factors impact on the likelihood of it occurring:

- Changing the stimulus - if the duration or intensity of the stimulus or situation changes then you may get a recurrence of the original response. For example, where there has been some initial success, we might be tempted to ask the child to stay longer than the agreed 10 minutes or to come to the playground after being in the classroom. This may reduce the likelihood of habituation occurring and leave the child in a heightened state of anxiety at the end of the exposure. It is important therefore not to change the agreed step.
- Duration – if a stimulus or situation is not experienced for a long period of time then you may see a full-strength reaction when it is encountered again. For example, we may have successfully habituated a child or young person to 'talk in front of the class' and then this does not occur for several weeks so the next time they are asked they experience a spike in anxiety. It is important therefore to regularly work on target situations that the child or young person experiences. Also – we should be mindful that graded exposure plans that have been successful may need to be repeated following extended absences, such as following the school holidays.
- Frequency - the more frequently a stimulus or situation is experienced the quicker habituation will be. This is important when planning your reintegration. Working daily on a smaller target is more likely to affect rapid change than less frequent exposure schedules.
- Intensity – if a stimulus is very intense and leads to an extreme emotional response then it is possible that habituation will not occur (just think of an alarm – we don't habituate to noises like that as they are too intense, uncomfortable, and frightening). Understanding the situations or contexts in which the child or young

person experiences the most anxiety is essential to building a plan which allows habituation to occur at the lower stages before tackling situations that might require more active management for habituation to occur or which might require continued avoidance in the short term (see a 'psychological safety').

A good graded-exposure plan should work systematically from situations or contexts that are lower intensity (that is, provoke the least emotional response) to those which are higher in intensity. This maximises the likelihood that habituation will occur. An avoidance hierarchy is an emotion-based ranking of situations, contexts, or places that a child or young person finds challenging and should be used as a basis for graded exposure planning.

It is important to understand that reintegration and graded exposure require a child or young person to experience small levels of discomfort before habituation occurs. Their avoidance behaviours are protecting them from unwanted and sometimes scary emotions and feelings. We must be mindful of this and ensure that we are asking something that we believe to be manageable. However, also crucially, we must ensure that we have addressed any underlying needs or issues before considering exposure. For example, if bullying was an underlying issue we would need to ensure the bullying had been addressed and some reparation work undertaken before working towards attending. We must only ask children and young people to do what we believe to be **safe and adequately supported** for their own safety and well-being. In addition to concerns about safety, exposure to a very intense stimulus will not lead to habituation and will undermine the success of a reintegration plan.

- **Social Skills Teaching:** involves teaching children and young people the necessary social skills to interact appropriately with their peers and teachers. It can use role-play, social stories, and other interactive methods to help the child understand and practise these skills. For EBSA, this could help reduce social anxiety and improve school relationships.
  
- **Emotion construction and regulation strategies interventions:** aim to teach children and young people how to understand the construction of their emotions and manage them effectively. For instance, using categorisation techniques can help analyse how sensations are labelled in terms of affect. The way one distinguishes between feeling anxious and feeling excited is strongly influenced by the specific emotion words used, which in turn profoundly shapes both action and perception. This process generates new emotion concepts, making the emotional experience less threatening and more adaptive.

Importantly, children are not limited to using conventional emotion words; they can also create their own to describe unique feelings. For example, a child might coin the term 'chipless' to express the specific disappointment they feel when they've eaten all their chips.

Our brains generate emotional experiences by making predictions based on past experiences. Within this framework, the categorisation of emotions is a vital tool. It provides us with the language, or "emotion words," to describe various emotional states, thereby enabling more effective emotional construction and understanding. This process is known as "emotional granularity," a term rooted in scientific literature (Barrett, 2017<sup>1</sup>). It involves discerning between not just basic emotions like "happy," "sad," or "angry," but also more nuanced ones like "elated," "content," "gloomy," and "melancholic."

For example, a child who initially describes their emotion broadly as feeling "bad" could, with the help of emotional categorisation, more accurately identify their feeling as "sad," "frustrated," "anxious," or "lonely."

Recognising and accurately labelling these diverse emotional states creates a conceptual framework that our brains use to predict and inform our responses to future emotional situations. This leads to more effective emotion regulation, as we become better equipped to understand both what we're feeling and why; therefore, we can respond more appropriately.

This perspective fundamentally shifts our approach to emotion regulation. If emotions are constructed based on past experiences and the labels we've learnt to apply, it implies that modifying our conceptual understanding can influence how we construct and experience emotions in the future. Therefore, teaching children to categorise their emotions, or even to create their own emotion words, can serve as a powerful tool for enhancing their emotional understanding and regulation.

- **Stress management techniques:** can involve a range of strategies to help manage stress, such as relaxation techniques, mindfulness, exercise, or time management strategies. For EBSA, this could mean helping the child or young person learn how to manage their stress and reduce feeling overwhelmed and make school feel more manageable.
- **Peer support or buddy systems:** involves pairing the child or young person with a peer who can provide support and help them navigate school. This could provide company during breaks, help explain school routines, or offer emotional support. For EBSA, having a supportive peer at school can make the environment seem less threatening and more supportive.

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<sup>1</sup> Barrett, L. F. (2017). How emotions are made: The secret life of the brain. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

- **Anxiety management tools:** may be needed where a situation is too significant for habituation to occur rapidly. Actively teaching children and young people techniques that can help to dissipate the thoughts and feelings associated with anxiety is helpful. Such techniques can increase the likelihood that habituation occurs and can also help them the child or young person feel that they have some control over their responses. Part of reintegration planning can ensure time is allocated to teaching anxiety management techniques. Then, once the child or young person is ready to increase their exposure to more challenging situations, they will have strategies already in place that they can employ. It is important to consider developmental levels as well as the capacity to put such strategies in place in the moment. It may be that as part of the reintegration plan the child or young person is accompanied by an adult who is able to co-regulate (that is to step them through the strategies that they need to employ) to increase the likelihood of habituation occurring.

**Physical and sensory interventions:**

For example:

- Adapting the physical environment, e.g., the number of movements needed to leave the classroom; place of sitting in the classroom.
- Sensory audit for classrooms.

**Family and home support interventions:**

These interventions involve working with the child or young person's family to create a supportive home environment. For example:

- Parenting support or training.
- Home-school communication strategies.