

# Emotionally Related School Avoidance (ERSA)

Information for  
parents and carers



**achieving  
for children**

# Good school attendance

Making sure your child attends school regularly is important.

When children attend school regularly and on time, they are more likely to do well in their learning, but also build strong relationships and feel connected with the school community.

Good attendance also demonstrates reliability which will help prepare children for life beyond education and supports the child's or young person's future opportunities.

By law, all children of compulsory school age must receive a full time education that meets their needs. Parents are responsible for making sure they attend school or are educated at home (elective home education).

If a child is regularly absent, they may fall behind with their learning, miss out on social interactions with children their own age and miss valuable learning experiences. You should be informed of school procedures to support good school attendance and punctuality. There are some reasons when absence may be authorised by the headteacher. Every time your child is off school, you must inform the school and explain the reasons. Only the headteacher can authorise absence. They may request further evidence to support the reasons for the absence.

It is important to stay in touch with the school about longer term illness so that they can work with you to minimise disruption to your child's learning and to also make sure communication continues to happen during this time.

A child who misses school for at least 10% of the time is considered a persistently absent child. Prolonged or frequent absenteeism is treated seriously, except where there are clear reasons for it (serious illness for example).

Parents are considered to be breaking the law when their child regularly misses school and can therefore be fined. Local authorities and schools also have legal powers to prosecute parents which can lead to a criminal record.

## How can I support good attendance? Attendance tips

- Try to establish a good routine early so that when your child does start school they are in good habits such as getting plenty of sleep.
- If appointments are needed for health reasons, try to make them after school hours or out of term time where possible.
- Offer support with homework and take an interest in their learning.
- Attend parents' evenings to discuss your child's progress.
- Don't allow your child to stay off school for a minor ailment.
- Ensure your child has a good understanding of why attendance is important.

## Working together in partnership

Regular and reliable communication between school and home is an important part of helping children have good school attendance. It is important to find out the methods your school uses to communicate with parents and what to do if you have a question or need to raise a concern. You can look on the school website or speak to a member of staff.



# Emotionally related school avoidance

This information leaflet has been provided to support parents with children who may be experiencing 'emotionally related school avoidance' (ERSA). It is a term that describes a small number of pupils who do not attend school, often having prolonged absence due to underlying emotional reasons.

Research has suggested that outcomes for young people who display ERSA include poor academic attainment, reduced social opportunities and limited employment opportunities. ERSA is also associated with poor adult mental health.

It is often characterised by internalised problems such as fear and anxiety, complaints of feeling ill without obvious cause, reluctance to leave home, or externalised problems, including avoidance and oppositional behaviour.

Pupils experiencing ERSA tend to stay at home when absent from school, and parents are usually aware of this. Sometimes, it will be obvious from a young person's presentation and chronic non-attendance that they are experiencing significant difficulties that result in avoidance or 'refusal'. However, there will be other pupils experiencing anxiety about going to school who it may be harder for school staff to identify.

These young people may have sporadic non-attendance or a pattern of absence corresponding to a particular lesson or day. When these children are in school, they may complain about feeling unwell or make frequent requests to leave the classroom. However, the longer the problems remain unaddressed, the more difficult it becomes to change the school avoiding behaviour.

Signs of ERSA are often identified as the following:

- fearfulness, anxiety, tantrums or expression of negative feelings when faced with the prospect of attending school
- complaining of abdominal pain, headache, sore throat, often with no signs of actual physical illness
- complaining of anxiety symptoms that include a racing heart, shaking, sweating, difficulty breathing, butterflies in the tummy or nausea, pins and needles. The symptoms are typically worse on a weekday

It is recognised that there are often risk factors identified which increase the vulnerability to ERSA. Research shows that it is typically the result of a combination of vulnerability factors for the child, family and school interacting with a particular trigger.

Possible triggers include: transition between primary and secondary education, loss or bereavement within the family, a change in friendship groups or bullying. Some pupils may find it harder to return to school following a prolonged absence, for instance following Covid-19 lockdown or due to illness or a school holiday, etc. It should be noted that there is still little agreement amongst researchers regarding vulnerability factors.

Historically, child or family-based factors tended to be emphasised, with the literature making reference to anxiety disorders, including separation or social anxiety. However, the importance of school-based factors in terms of risk and resilience, are increasingly becoming the focus of research in this area.

We know, that the earlier difficulties are identified and support put in place, the more successful we are at developing children's and young people's ability to cope with their anxiety and develop their resilience to cope with life's challenges. This can result in improved attendance and life opportunities.

# Supporting your child

One of the most important ways you can support your child is to calmly listen to them and acknowledge that their fears are real to them. Remind them how important it is to attend school and reassure them that you and the school will work with them to make school a happier place for them. Tell the school there is a problem as soon as possible and work together with the school to address the issue.

A plan should be made with the school to help your child. Towards the beginning of plan, your child may show more unhappiness and you should prepare yourself for this. It is really important that all adults at home and school work together to agree a firm and consistent approach. Any concerns about the plan should not be shared with your child and a positive united front is recommended.

It is likely that there may be difficulties implementing the plan and these should be anticipated and solutions found. You should try to keep an optimistic approach. If your child fails to attend school on one day, start again the next day. It is also important to remember there is likely to be more difficulty after a school holiday, period of illness or after the weekend.

You may feel tempted to change schools, however research tells us that often difficulties will re-emerge in the new school and whenever possible, it is better to try to resolve the issue in the current school.

Finally, as a parent it can be really difficult to see your child unhappy. Make sure that you have someone to talk to too. This could be a friend, family member or an organisation such as those listed at the end of this leaflet.

Some parents find their children's distress at going to school so hard to bear they keep them at home to avoid daily upsets. It may seem like a solution, but doing this will confirm your child's fears about school and can make the problems much worse. It is really important to address these issues with the school and work together.

## Tackle it early

The longer a problem with going to school persists, the deeper it becomes. Seek help from the school and make an appointment to talk about your worries.



# Exploring the concerns with your child

## Talk with your child about why they do not want to go to school

Consider all the possibilities. Be sympathetic, supportive, and understanding of why they are upset. Try to agree how to manage stressful situations that you both identify as causing the worries or symptoms. Try out practical strategies that help them to be in control of their anxiety. For example, younger children could try making a 'worry box' where at a certain time each day they write down their worry, post it in the box, close the lid and don't worry any more about it that day. Once a week, you can look through the worries together. For teens and young adults, support them in finding anxiety-reducing activities like sports, a creative hobby or youth club.

## Make a commitment to be extra firm on school mornings, when children complain most about their symptoms

Keep discussions about physical symptoms or anxieties to a minimum. For example, do not ask your child how they feel or discuss worries or concerns about school in the morning. If they are well enough to be up and around the house, then they are well enough to attend school.

## Acknowledge that you understand your child's concerns, but insist on their immediate return to school

The longer your child stays home, the more difficult their eventual return will be. Explain that their physical symptoms are probably due to worry – perhaps about doing well in school, homework, relationships with teachers, or anxieties over relationships with friends and other pupils. Let your child know that school attendance is required by law. They will continue to exert some pressure upon you to stay home, but you must remain determined to get your child back in school.

## **If your child stays home, be sure they are safe and comfortable, but do not give them any special treatment**

Your child's symptoms should be treated with consideration and understanding, but your child's day should not be a holiday. During the school day, your child should:

- get up and be dressed by school time
- have limited access to TV, mobile phone, computer and the internet during school hours
- encouraged to complete their school work
- have limited one-on-one time with the parent until after school hours
- have no activities out of the home, such as shopping



## **Your child may need to see a doctor when they stay home because of a physical illness**

Reasons to remain home must be due to recognisable symptoms: a temperature greater than 101 degrees, vomiting or diarrhea. For any other symptoms, your child can go to school and if they are too unwell to be there, the school will contact you to bring them home.

## **Try to reduce your child's fear of failure and disappointment**

Help them to recognise that these happen to everyone and it's ok.

## **Make sure their routines are consistent**

This includes time for regular meals, homework, fun and bedtime.

## **Help your child develop independence by encouraging activities with other children outside the home**

These can include clubs, sports activities, and sleepovers with friends.

## **You could consider talking to your employer about the situation**

See if you need any reasonable adjustments. More and more employers are committing to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of their employees.

# Working in partnership with the school

You can expect the school to:

- maintain close contact with you and your child, even during extended periods of non-attendance
- name an agreed member of staff as a link person
- work in partnership with you and your child to find out what difficulties your child is experiencing and find ways of making school a happier place and improve their attendance
- hold meetings to devise a plan in conjunction with you and your child. The plan should include what the next steps will be
- respond to any school-based needs, such as learning worries, dealing with bullying or support with friendships
- consider the support your child might require on arrival at school. This might include meeting with a friend at a specific place and time, using a quiet space to settle before school starts, engaging in a preferred activity or being given a responsibility such as a monitor role
- consider requesting involvement from other professionals if difficulties

## **Discuss your child's school avoidance with the school staff**

Contact their class teacher, tutor, attendance officer or headteacher. Agree on strategies to make things easier. These could include things like a buddy, and regular check-ins on progress. If your child has a special educational need, this can be a good time to review their support plan or to ask for a review of the education, health and care plan. For instance, you can ask if more or different support is needed.

## **Ask the school staff for help with your child while they are at school**

Agreed members of school staff can care for your child should they become anxious, upset or overwhelmed, and encourage their return to the classroom.

## **If a problem like a school bully or a teacher is the cause of your child's anxiety, become an advocate for your child and discuss these problems with the school staff**

The school may need to make some adjustments to relieve the pressure on your child in the classroom or playground.

## **Further support**

### **Websites**

#### **Young Minds**

[www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk)

Kooth online counselling for young people in Kingston and Richmond

[www.kooth.com](http://www.kooth.com)

#### **Books**

'Helping your child with fears and worries' Second Edition, *Cathy Cresswell and Lucy Willetts*

'What To Do When You Worry Too Much: A Kid's Guide to Overcoming Anxiety', *Dawn Huebner and Bonnie Matthews*

'Anxiety survival guide for teens: CBT skills to overcome fear, worry and panic', *Jennifer Shannon*