

Emotionally Related School Avoidance (ERSA)

Guidance for schools



**achieving
for children**

Introduction to anxiety

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is an uncomfortable feeling of fear or impending disaster. It involves the thoughts, behaviour and bodily reactions a person has when they are presented with an event or situation that they feel they cannot manage or undertake successfully. Anxiety is a psychological (in our thoughts), behavioural (what we do or don't do) and physiological (physical) state.

Fear, anxiety or worry is such a normal part of our human experience that we rarely stop and think about it. In fact, lower levels of anxiety (or higher ones that are temporary) are useful to us as stress responses linked to survival. Anxiety can be thought of as an emotional marker for an event which has caused us harm or near harm, and thereby reminds us to avoid similar situations in the future. Anxiety helps prepare and mobilise the body for fight, flight or freeze by releasing a quick burst of the chemical adrenaline that produces extra energy, more muscle power and speeds up our thinking.

Everybody experiences feelings of anxiety. It is a normal and natural reaction to something which is seen as threatening. However, when anxiety moves beyond short-lived experiences and begins to interfere with everyday life, we need to understand what is happening. When this happens, especially with socialising or going to school, it is given various names like: 'anxiety disorder', 'social phobia', 'agoraphobia', 'school phobia' or 'school refusal'.

These difficulties are surprisingly common, with Young Minds (2013) identifying that at any one time, one in six young people will experience significant anxiety. That equates to five pupils in an average class of 30.

Anxiety can be seen as having four main parts.

Emotional

This may involve a feeling of overwhelming fear. Often when dealing with anxiety, it is also common to have feelings of anger, sadness, shame or guilt.

Physical

This includes physiological experiences such as nausea, sweating, shaking, dry mouth and the need to go to the toilet.

Cognitive (anxious thoughts)

This may include detailed mental pictures of an awful event, or it may be a thought that the person cannot cope or is not good enough.

Behavioural

This includes everything from refusing to speak to running away or self-harm.

This guidance is designed to support schools managing the issues associated with a child or young person not attending school due to anxiety. Within Kingston and Richmond, this is referred to as emotionally related school avoidance (ERSA).

Understanding emotionally related school avoidance

Children and young people may miss school for a variety of reasons and the following classification is a useful tool to help distinguish between the different groups of non-attenders.

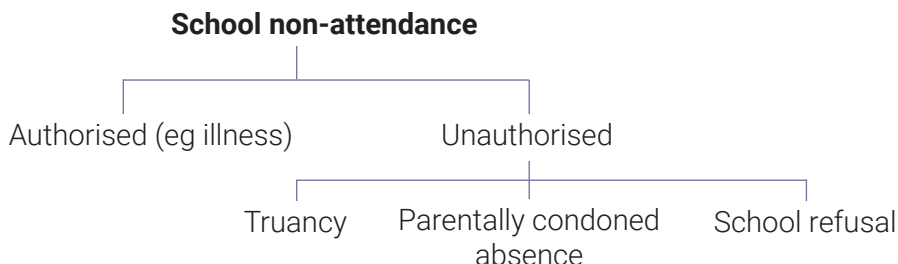


Figure 1: Classification of school non-attendance (Thambirajah et al, 2008)

The school staff member with responsibility for analysing school attendance data needs to be aware of the different forms of non-attendance. ERSA is very different to other reasons for non-attendance such as truanting.

This simple flow chart can support staff when determining if ERSA should be considered.

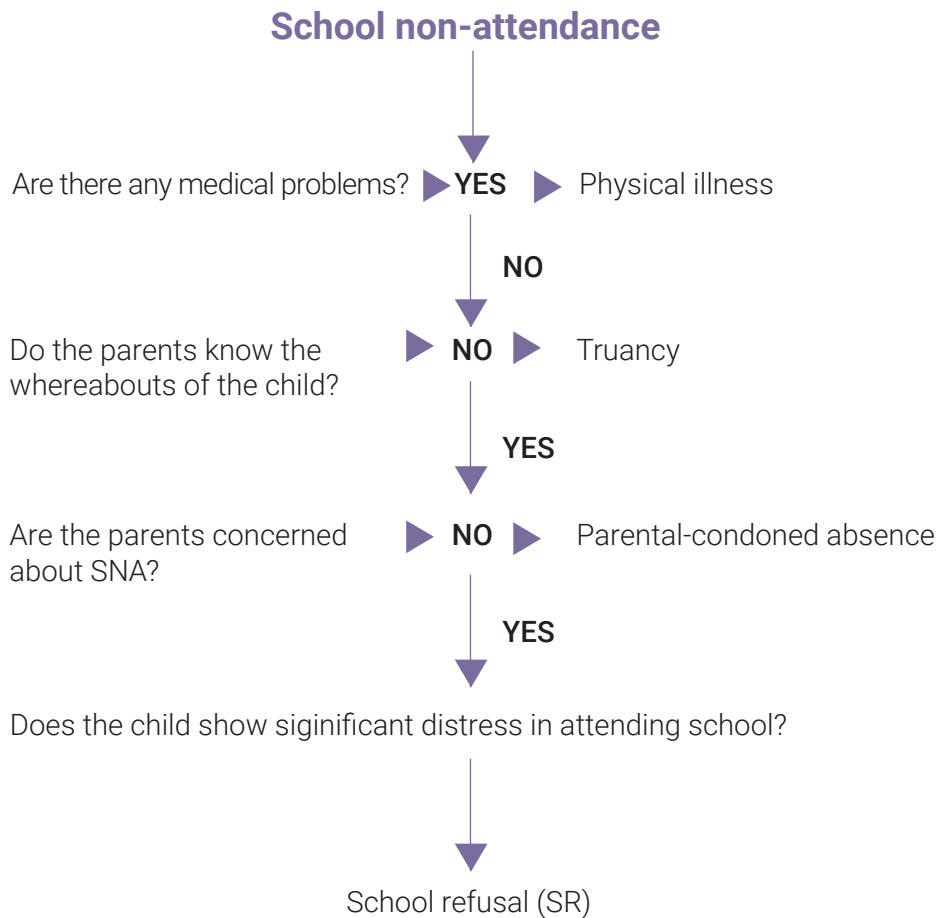


Figure 2: A simplified flowchart for the identification of ERSA (Thambirajah et al, 2008)

Why does ERSA happen?

ERSA is typically associated with emotional symptoms that often manifest behaviourally. There is often no single cause of ERSA. Researchers believe that there is likely to be a combination of factors which put a child or young person at risk of non-attendance due to anxiety. Table 1 below shows some of the potential factors known to be involved across different contexts (school, family, within child). When risk factors outweigh protective factors, then children and young people can be at risk of school avoidance. However, it is important to note that whilst there are identified risk factors, children and young people can experience these issues without developing ERSA.

Each child's or young person's risk and resilience is defined by their individual context. It can also be helpful to think of different types of risk factors according to when they occur:

- predisposing factors: those that make anxiety more likely to develop
- precipitating factors: those relating to things that have happened recently
- perpetuating factors: those that are likely to maintain anxiety

Factors associated with vulnerability of ERSA

Factors associated with vulnerability of EBSA

School Factors	Family Factors	Child factors
Bullying (the most common school factor)	Separation and divorce or change in family dynamic	Temperamental style- reluctance to interact and withdrawal from unfamiliar settings, people or objects
Difficulties in specific subject	Parent physical and mental health problems	Fear of failure and poor self confidence
Transition to secondary school, key stage or change of school	Overprotective parenting style	Physical illness
Structure of the school day	Dysfunctional family interactions	Age (5-6, 11-12 & 13-14 years)
Academic demands/high levels of pressure and performance-orientated classrooms	Being the youngest child in the family	Learning Difficulties, developmental problems or Autism Spectrum Condition if unidentified or unsupported
Transport or journey to school	Loss and Bereavement	Separation Anxiety from parent
Exams	High levels of family stress	Traumatic events
Peer or staff relationship difficulties	Family history of EBSA	
	Young carer	

Table 1: Common factors contributing to ERSA (Thambirajah et al, 2008)

Autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) and ERSA

All children and young people are likely to experience anxiety at some point in their school careers, but children and young people with ASD may be more prone to experiencing anxiety because of the nature of their difficulties with social communication, social interaction and social imagination. Children and young people with ASD are likely to have difficulties with understanding social situations and with social use of language. They may also have cognitive differences, such as having a narrow focus of attention or special interest, and may be less flexible in their thinking and behaviour.

Some of the common triggers for anxiety for this group include:

- changes in routine
- changes in the environment
- unfamiliar social situations
- sensory sensitivities - heightened sensitivity to environmental stimuli or alternatively, lowered sensitivity levels
- fear of a particular situation, activity or object

The vicious cycle

For children and young people experiencing ERSA, the thought of having to attend school often leads to feelings of fear as well as possible feelings of anger, sadness or shame. This will vary from person to person, but the four parts of anxiety relating to attending school may look like this:

- **Emotional:** An absolute feeling that they cannot handle school.
- **Physical:** Strong physical reactions, including nausea, shaking, pain.
- **Cognitive:** Thoughts about all the awful things that could happen in school.
- **Behavioural:** Active avoidance of school or even reminders of school.

The relief of avoiding school 'rewards' the avoidant behaviour, while at the same time undermining the child's or young person's belief in their ability to handle the situation. With a repeated pattern of anxiety these feelings often build up into a vicious cycle that maintains the ERSA.

ERSA as a continuum of need

ERSA is best considered as a continuum of need. The West Sussex Educational Psychology Service developed a model in 2004 that helps schools consider the relationship between school non-attendance and anxiety. The model identifies four different populations of children and young people with differing levels of anxiety and school attendance.

- **Group A:** the majority of the school population who are attending school and are not anxious.
- **Group B:** children and young people who are very anxious, but who do maintain their school attendance.
- **Group C:** children and young people who have low school attendance but do not show anxiety as the major factor leading to their non-attendance. These children may be considered to be truanting.
- **Group D:** children and young people who are highly anxious and feel unable to attend school (ERSA).

The current guidance addresses anxious learners and the emphasis is appropriately placed on the importance of early identification of ERSA and on early intervention. Applying the principles and strategies shared in this guidance to support children and young people in Group B, should successfully reduce the number of children and young people who move along the continuum into Group D. Sustaining and building on existing levels of school attendance should always be the primary aim of any intervention.

Managing ERSA as a whole school issue

ERSA should be recognised at a whole school level. Being absent from school may constitute a safeguarding concern if no-one is seeing the child and young people regularly.

The following are three key principles which schools should consider.

Early intervention

Research has shown that a key determinant of likely success in managing ERSA is early intervention. Therefore, this guidance should be read alongside Achieving for Children's (AfC's) ERSA toolkit and the school attendance policy.

Early identification of ERSA is reliant on the systematic management of attendance data. Schools need clear procedures around how attendance data is analysed and how to identify next steps if concerns emerge from the data. Therefore, anyone responsible for managing attendance data should be appropriately trained so they can carefully consider how any non-attendance should be attributed. The member of staff responsible for managing the data should know to whom any concerns should be referred.

In secondary schools, the established school systems should encourage pastoral managers, Heads of Year and tutors to identify those children and young people who are still attending school, but who may be experiencing anxiety about attending lessons or school so that support can be put in place promptly.

The role of the ERSA co-ordinator

Archer et al (2003) identified that responsibility for ERSA was typically distributed across a diverse range of staff – headteachers, education welfare officers, heads of year and/or SENCos. However, in order to support a co-ordinated, whole school approach, it is advisable that each school has a lead person acting as the ERSA Co-ordinator.

The following roles and responsibilities should be considered for the role of ERSA Co-ordinator.

- Ensure that the school systems adhere to AfC's ERSA Toolkit, to best support early identification of ERSA.
- Act as the point of contact for the attendance officer(s) who manage the day-to-day analysis of the attendance data.
- Ensure that the existing systems around analysing absence are able to identify the different types of unauthorised absence - anxiety related, truanting, or parent or carer condoned.
- Establish clear systems to manage absence of different types.
- Work closely with parents, with the use of ERSA 'Information for parents and carers' leaflet.
- Ensure that school protocols consider anxiety-related absence appropriately for example threat of prosecution can be an appropriate response to Group C, but not to Group D
- Ensure that all colleagues (teaching and non-teaching) understand the different types of absence (see above)
- Co-ordinate provision at school for children and young people who are attending, but have been at risk of ERSA.
- Co-ordinate provision for children and young people who are not currently attending (for example, children and young people may be directed to online learning and/or provided access to Google Classroom. Where appropriate work may be sent home, however this should be decided on a case-by-case basis. Teacher feedback remains important).
- Support the development of effective home-school working relationships.
- Ensure that safety protocols are in place around home or lone working for staff visiting children and young people at home or off site.
- Ensure children and young people remain connected to their school during any absence through emails, letters, etc.

- Liaise with primary school colleagues about potentially vulnerable pupils.
- Work alongside professionals from AfC, the local authority or health services to identify ways forward for the most complex and chronic non-attenders, as part of the graduated response.
- Access continuing professional development opportunities offered by AfC and others.

Sharing information and transition

The ERSA co-ordinator at each school has an important role to play by ensuring appropriate information sharing regarding children and young people experiencing ERSA.

The ERSA co-ordinator should ensure information is shared with multi-agency professionals, the children and young people and their family and with other schools as appropriate. In particular, secondary ERSA co-ordinators should liaise with their primary school colleagues about any children and young people who may be vulnerable to experiencing ERSA.

The primary ERSA co-ordinators should raise with the secondary ERSA co-ordinator any children and young people where the school staff are actively supporting their attendance, even if they are attending 100%. Primary and secondary schools should work together to identify those Year 5 or 6 children who may benefit from an enhanced or extended transition - those who could be vulnerable to becoming a sustained non-attender upon the move to Key Stage 3. Should a child move schools at any stage in their education, appropriate information should be shared with the next school if the child and young people has needed support with ERSA at any point in their school career.

Supporting anxious children and young people who still attend school

This section provides some guiding principles for adults supporting children and young people who maintain school attendance while still experiencing high levels of anxiety (Group B, West Sussex Model).

The importance of considering ERSA as a continuum of need is emphasised once more as working with this group of children and young people aims to reduce the numbers developing more complex difficulties. The following section is divided into three key actions for school staff to consider. ERSA co-ordinators will be responsible for disseminating the information in this guidance to parents, staff and pupils.

Sharing general information about anxiety

Sharing information with children and young people

Considering the prevalence of anxiety among children and young people (Young Minds, 2013), schools should consider providing information about anxiety to all young people through their pastoral systems such as tutor time and assemblies. It is important for every child and young person to learn about the physical and psychological impact anxiety can have on their individual wellbeing. Anxiety is a strong emotion which can be very unpleasant and the impact is intensified if a child or young person does not have a good understanding of what is happening to them.

Sharing information with school staff

It is also important to raise staff awareness of anxiety and how it can impact on children and young people within the school environment. This should focus on supporting staff to understand the issues around anxiety in relation to their role and how they can most effectively support an anxious child or young people in the classroom.

Sharing information with parents:

See AfC's ERSA 'Information for parents and carers' information booklet.

School strategies to reduce anxiety

School staff can use a range of strategies to support children and young people to experience lower levels of anxiety at school. The purpose of the strategies is to support children and young people to develop a sense of belonging at school and to feel safe in that environment. These can be found in AfC's ERSA toolkit.

Exploring the reasons for anxiety

In order to inform an effective support plan and ensure positive outcomes for the child or young people experiencing anxiety, it is important for the school, family and child or young person to understand the reasons why they are feeling anxious. Further information can be found in AfC's ERSA toolkit.

Other professional roles and responsibilities within Kingston and Richmond for helping to tackle anxiety

AfC SEND Local Offer - Kingston and Richmond

The SEND Local Offer provides information on local services and support available for families including children and young people aged 0 to 25 years with special educational needs or disabilities:

https://kr.afcinfo.org.uk/local_offer

Single Point of Access (SPA)

Achieving for Children's SPA allows professionals and/or families to refer a child, young person, parent or carer that needs support in some way by contacting our SPA Team. Referral is made by telephone or email via the Kingston or Richmond Council websites.

SPA is Guildhall 2, Kingston. Call 020 8547 5008 from 8am to 6pm, Monday to Friday, or 020 8770 5000 out of hours.

School nurse

Your school nurse provides a link between school, home and the community. Their aim is to improve the health and wellbeing of children and young people.

Emotional Health Service (EHS)

The EHS is part of Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in Kingston and Richmond. The service provides assessment and evidence based therapy for children and young people aged 0 to 18 years and their families. The service focuses on children and young people with mild to moderate mental health needs. The service works in close partnership with education, health and social care. To access support from EHS a referral should be made through the SPA, referrals can come from professionals, parents and or young people.

Educational Psychology Service (EPS)

The EPS is a dynamic and innovative service which applies psychology and evidence-based practice, grounded in theory and research, to bring about change in the lives of children and young people (0 to 25 years) in Kingston and Richmond. They work collaboratively with others to build, embed and sustain positive change and provide every child and young person with the opportunity to succeed as effective learners, confident individuals and engaged and informed contributors to society.

Educational psychologists are commissioned to work by schools, and so liaison with the school SENCo is recommended when considering the role of the educational psychologist.

Family Support Team (FST)

The FST is part of the Early Help Services. The team work across Kingston and Richmond and their role is to:

- support referred children and young people through named allocated staff case holding
- assess the needs of children and young people, identify and arrange services to meet those needs
- support children and young people to have the same opportunities as their non-disabled peers
- review and monitor services provided to families we support
- design, deliver and monitor support programmes such as behavioural management, reward systems or communication tools to assist children and families open to us

Referrals to the service are handled by the Single Point of Access. Call 020 8547 5008.

Education Welfare Service (EWS)

The EWS works with children and their families as well as schools to help ensure that all children of compulsory school age are in receipt of education. Whether this is received through attending school or otherwise often referred to as elective home. The service is also responsible for ensuring regular school attendance by addressing persistent absences as well as having other statutory duties that relate to children of compulsory school age which includes, children missing from education and licencing regulations regarding children. Each school has an allocated education welfare officer.

Referrals to the service are handled by the Single Point of Access (SPA). Call 020 8547 5008.

Education Inclusion Support Service (EISS)

The Education Inclusion Support Service (EISS) offers consultancy on all aspects of inclusion including behaviour management approaches and policies. The service supports schools in developing sustainable inclusion strategies and practices, as well as offering advice and guidance about children with special educational needs, including those with challenging behaviour and social and emotional difficulties which impact on behaviour for learning. The EISS can support schools to implement the early intervention strategies outlined in AfC's ERSA Toolkit.

The service works via referral from schools and other AfC services.

T: 020 8547 6677

Publications that offer support and guidance to schools on developing wellbeing and positive mental health

Please find below some resources that may be helpful for schools in relation to mental health and wellbeing:

- **National Autistic Society**
Guidance and helpline for parents, young people and staff
www.autism.org.uk
- **Schools in Mind: Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families**
A network for school staff which shares practical, academic and clinical expertise regarding the wellbeing and mental health issues that affect schools
www.annafreud.org/what-we-do/schools-in-mind
- **Young Minds**
For support around children's and young people's mental health
<https://youngminds.org.uk>

References

- **Guidance to Schools:**
A graduated response to school non-attendance.
Nottinghamshire educational psychology Service (2014)
- **Understanding school refusal**
A handbook for professionals in education, health and social care
Thambirajah, M S, Grandison, K J & De-Hayes, L (2008) Jessica
Kingsley Publishers
- **Emotionally Based School Avoidance:**
Good practice guidance for schools and support agencies
West Sussex County Council Educational Psychology Service
(2018)