

Section 6: Information for Schools

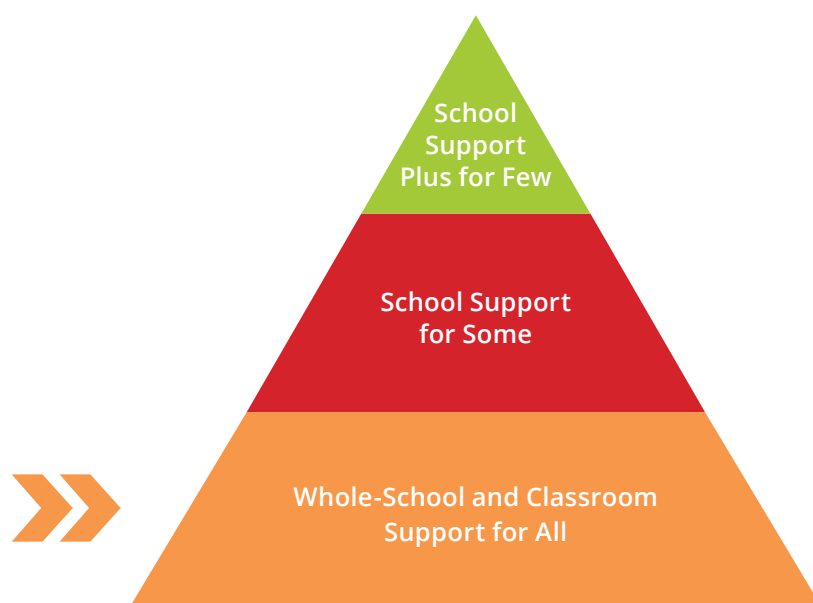
In this section we consider how schools can respond to EBSA through the lens of the “Continuum of Support” model (DES & NEPS, 2007, 2010a, 2010b). A range of school-based intervention strategies and interventions at the “Whole-School”/“Support for All”, “Support for Some” and “Support for a Few” levels of the Continuum of Support (COS) are outlined.

Whole-school Approach (“Support for All” Level)

In order to help CYP to thrive and to prevent issues such as EBSA, it is vital that schools have a broader whole-school approach to promoting emotional wellbeing and positive mental health.

“ A consistent approach to supporting the young person is necessary. A toolkit to aid a whole school approach to school avoidance would greatly enhance consistency. ”
(Teacher with experience of successfully managing EBSA)

Figure 7: The Continuum of Support “Support for All” Level



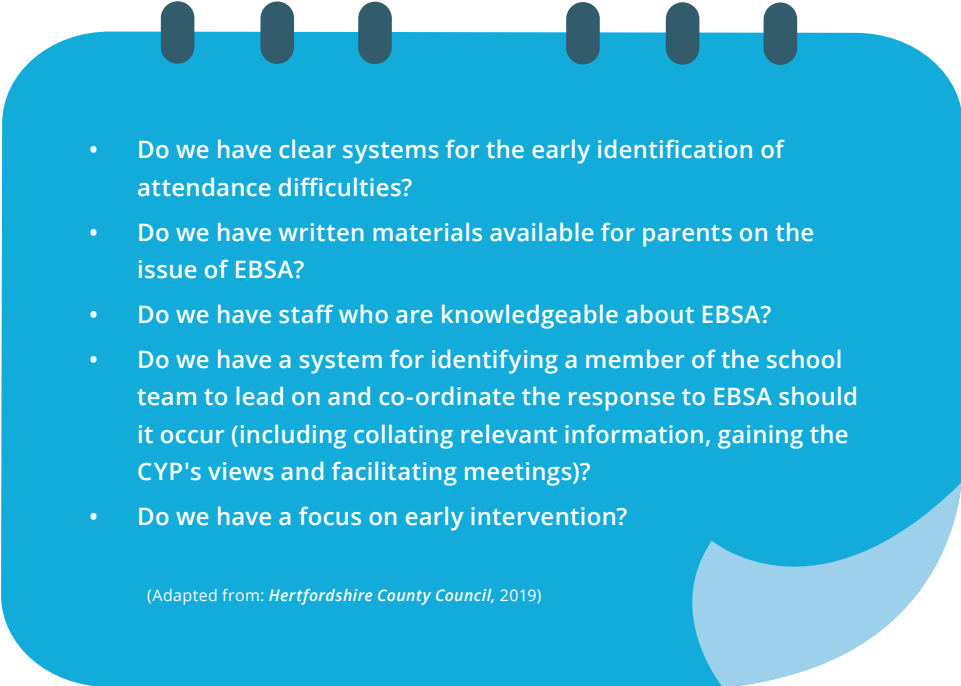
The Support for All level of the Continuum of Support involves a process of prevention, universal school-based intervention and early identification. The emphasis here is on whole-school approaches to developing best practices in responding to the need of all students. Intervention at the whole-school level is intended to be proactive. It focuses on the main student body, and this phase of intervention should effectively meet the needs of about 80-90% of the school population. Within the context of EBSA, this phase of the Continuum aims to support and promote emotional well-being, positive mental health and resilience, a sense of belonging and school connectedness. This phase also focuses on the early identification of “at-risk” students. It is important that schools take a proactive approach to understanding and managing EBSA, as part of a whole-school initiative to monitoring attendance and promoting emotional wellbeing. Figure 8 highlights some key elements of an effective whole-school approach that aims to promote resilience and prevent EBSA.

Figure 8: Whole-School Approach to EBSA

WHOLE SCHOOL APPROACH (SUPPORT FOR ALL)



To ensure best practice schools can check the following questions:

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- Do we have clear systems for the early identification of attendance difficulties?
 - Do we have written materials available for parents on the issue of EBSA?
 - Do we have staff who are knowledgeable about EBSA?
 - Do we have a system for identifying a member of the school team to lead on and co-ordinate the response to EBSA should it occur (including collating relevant information, gaining the CYP's views and facilitating meetings)?
 - Do we have a focus on early intervention?

(Adapted from: Hertfordshire County Council, 2019)

The following section details some whole-school approaches that may help to reduce the prevalence of EBSA in our schools.

School Culture and Ethos

School culture and ethos can play an important role in fostering resilience and minimising the prevalence of EBSA. A welcoming and inclusive whole-school culture and ethos can be an important factor in promoting a sense of connection and belonging to the school community. There are many ways that schools can aim to foster a sense of connection and belonging;

- Ensuring that systems are in place so that the voice of the CYP, teacher and parent are heard and lead to improvements in school culture and ethos.
- Offering a wide range of curricular options to cater for the range of educational needs that may exist within the school.
- Promoting differentiation and inclusive educational practices.
- Respecting and celebrating diversity.
- Offering a wide range of extra-curricular and co-curricular activities.
- Having good pastoral care systems in place, such as class tutors, Year Heads, etc. with clear communication channels.
- Providing opportunities for student leadership.

Early Identification

Early identification is essential to ensure a proactive and responsive approach to EBSA. This can include careful monitoring of attendance and being alert to potential indicators of EBSA. Attendance data is helpful as it provides hard data such as time missed and also allows potential patterns to be observed. Monitoring attendance is in itself crucial in terms of identifying CYPs who may indicate early warning signs for EBSA. This is an area that all schools are obliged to adhere to and it is important that this information is utilised effectively.

Additionally, there are several potential signs of EBSA that may be observed in school settings, and it is important that all school staff members are alerted to these potential indicators. Figure 9 provides a visual overview of potential indicators of EBSA (signs that may be observed in a school setting). It is important to note that many CYPs are occasionally reluctant to go to school or may have some anxiety about certain activities. It is normal for CYPs to miss some days of school during the year and most young people will show some of these signs occasionally. EBSA however, is a more persistent, prolonged and repeated pattern of behaviour. It is important, therefore, that there are clear systems in place for the early identification of EBSA, and, ideally, that there is a designated member of staff that has responsibility for investigating and acting on concerns.

Figure 9: Potential Indicators of EBSA

POTENTIAL INDICATORS OF EMOTIONALLY BASED SCHOOL AVOIDANCE (EBSA)



Signs that may be observed in school:



ABSENCES



- Long, unexplained absences from school
- Frequent absences for minor illnesses
- Difficulty attending for full days
- Periodic or missed classes with no explanation
- Patterns in absences such as particular subjects, days, after weekends or holidays
- Frequent lateness to school or particular subjects
- Frequently missing the bus or lift to school

SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL ISSUES



- Refusal to separate from parent
- Frequently asking to ring home/ go home
- Reluctant to go on school trips
- Frequently appears to be socially isolated or avoidant of peers
- Reports experiences of being bullied or feeling victimised (by peers or staff)
- Prolonged difficulties (e.g. anxiety) when mixing with others
- Friendship difficulties
- Periods of increased emotionality

ILLNESS



- Frequent complaints before or during school, such as headaches, stomach-ache, feeling dizzy or tired
- These symptoms often fade if allowed to stay home
- Presents with low mood
- Appears fatigued, restless, irritable

UNDERACHIEVING



- Underachieving academically
- Often has difficulty focussing
- Appears confused, disengaged
- Avoids participating in class



Most young people will show some of these signs occasionally. EBSA is a more persistent, prolonged and repeated pattern of behaviour.

Source: Anne Marie Toomey

General Screening

In addition to monitoring of attendance, having robust general screening systems in place at a whole-school level can also help to identify learning and social, emotional, behavioural issues at an early stage and prevent CYP from potentially “falling through the net”. Comprehensive guidance on screening for learning needs and social, emotional and behavioural functioning needs is available in the DES Continuum of Support guidelines, which are available to download on the NEPS platform of the www.gov.ie website.

For **Primary Schools** the relevant guidelines are:

- **Special Education Needs-A Continuum of Support**
 - Guidelines for Teachers
 - Resource Pack for Teachers
- **Behavioural Emotional and Social Difficulties-A Continuum of Support**

For **Post Primary Schools** the relevant guidelines are:

- **A Continuum of Support for Post Primary Teachers**
 - Guidelines for Teachers
 - Resource Pack for Teachers

Promoting Parental Involvement


The development of an active and positive relationship between parents and school is essential in ensuring that, when difficulties occur, there can be a quick, collaborative response. Having open channels of communication in place ensures that, where concerns arise, they can be dealt with efficiently. Active parental involvement can be encouraged in schools through a range of strategies including Parents Associations, Coffee mornings, encouraging parents to assist with fundraising activities, extra-curricular activities etc.

In addition, home-school communication can be promoted by having regular Parent-Teacher meetings, using social media or Parent Text systems to communicate key messages to parents and having clear communication channels in place, should parents wish to raise a concern. It is also important that parents receive consistent information and advice in terms of encouraging regular school attendance and initial steps to take should a decrease in attendance be noted. Home-School Community Liaison (HSCL) teachers are an invaluable resource here (for those schools who have a HSCL teacher).

Developing supportive partnerships between home and school is an essential element in understanding a child or young person's story and recognising their strengths and the protective factors supporting the child's development, as well as their needs.

School Based Programmes/Curricula

There are a number of school-based curricula and programmes that aim to foster emotional wellbeing. These include but are not limited to:

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- Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE)
 - "Stay Safe" Programme
 - Social Skills Programmes
 - The School's Code of Behaviour (including incentive programmes to encourage positive behaviour such as regular attendance)
 - Health and Safety Policy
 - "FRIENDS for Life"/"My FRIENDS Youth" Programmes
 - School Completion Programme supports and intervention, where available

Continuing Professional Learning for Education Staff

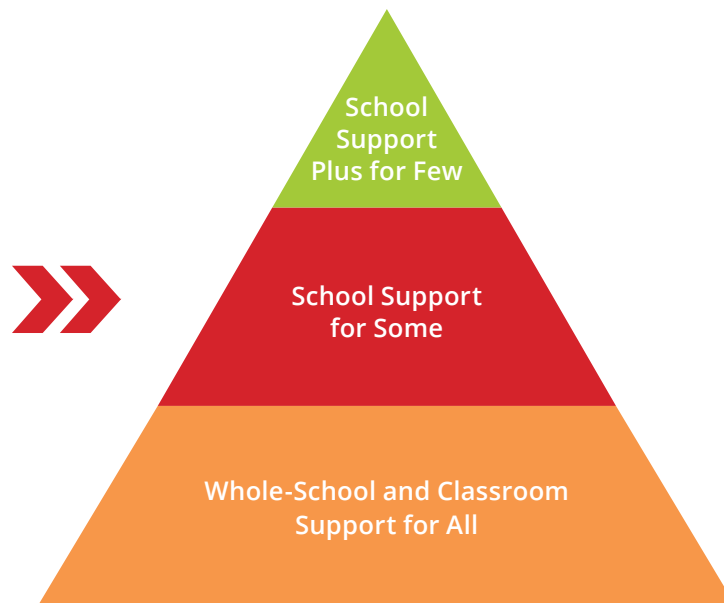
It is important that schools aim to ensure that opportunities to learn about EBSA are available for all staff. Training should make it clear that the promotion of positive emotional health and wellbeing is everybody's responsibility. Training can provide staff with an understanding of EBSA, and particularly, an awareness of the potential indicators of EBSA.

Transitions

Literature has shown that peaks in the number of young people with EBSA correspond with transition in educational phases. It is therefore important that robust systems are put in place to ensure that CYP are supported to make successful transitions at key points in their educational lives. In the "Information for Parents" (Section 3) some advice is provided for parents in relation to this. Successful transition in education settings also needs to be addressed. Transition and induction programmes can alleviate any potential anxiety and provide the tools for successful transitions. For example, at the primary to post-primary transition point, good transition practice involves effective exchange of information (pastoral and academic information) from primary to post-primary school. It is important for feeder schools to flag any early separation difficulties and past EBSA even if the issues were mild and attendance is now fine. Post-primary schools could consider asking for this information on any transition gathering forms. Good transition also involves good communication with the young person and their parents.



Figure 10: The Continuum of Support "Support for Some" Level



The “Support for Some” level of the Continuum of Support applies to those pupils for whom interventions at class or whole school support level, for example “FRIENDS for Life”, are not enough to fully meet the pupil’s needs in relation to EBSA. The emphasis here is on a more individualised approach to develop best practices in responding to the need of individual students. The NEPS Problem-Solving Framework, outlined in Section 4, is a useful framework to guide the information-gathering, planning and review process at this stage of the COS.

Information Gathering

The first step before designing a plan to support a young person experiencing EBSA is to gather information that will assist in understanding the function of the behaviour. Kearney and Silverman (1995) proposed a model for school non-attendance identifying four categories for these behaviours.

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1. **Avoidance of the school setting** (anxiety around the environment, e.g., the school building, fear of the toilets, noise in the playground, tests and exams, school work or a particular teacher)
 2. **Escape from difficult social situations** (may be due to unsatisfactory relationships with peers or staff, or difficulty in navigating social situations, feeling left out at playtime, reading out loud in class, working as part of a group)
 3. **Attention seeking or separation anxiety behaviour** (young person might want to stay at home as they are worried about a parent or family member)
 4. **Rewarding experiences outside of school** (opportunities to engage with preferred activities – online games, meeting friends, going shopping, being on phone etc.)

The School Refusal Assessment Scale Revised (SRAS-R) which was developed by Kearney and Albano (2007) can be a useful tool to attempt to identify the potential functions of EBSA. This can be accessed at the following link schoolavoidance.org

Figure 11 below illustrates how the different potential functions of EBSA may be present in the school setting.

Figure 11: Functions of EBSA Behaviour

Avoid school situations which cause distress	Avoid school-related social/performance situations
Somatic complaints. Sense of dread, nervousness, sadness in school.	Talking with peers. Group work. PE/drama/choir. Lunch time. Tests/presentations.
Attention	Get something rewarding
Get attention from significant people. Give attention to others e.g. young carers; keeping others safe.	Preferred activities. Online gaming/shopping. TV/computers.

Ensure that the views of the young person, the family and key school staff are listened to. It is important to always aim to explore all three sources of information (school staff, family and CYP). The following strategies may be used to gather important information that will be useful in developing a student support plan or return to school plan.

Step 1: Gathering information from children and young people: What is the concern and why is it happening?

- It is essential to get the student's perspective on what is happening. However, be aware that talking about returning to school may provoke anxiety. We encourage you to empathise with the student and acknowledge that things are difficult, but don't collude or promote the EBSA behaviour (i.e. the student is aware that EBSA behaviour needs to change).
- Think about the student's age, level of understanding and language level when discussing EBSA, and associated thoughts, feelings and body sensations.
- Some students may prefer to draw or write, than talk.
- Externalise the anxiety – this helps the student to separate his/herself from the problem. Anxiety is the problem, not the young person e.g., ask the young person what name they could give to the feeling? What colour they associate with it? If it was a thing, what would it be and if it could talk, what would it say?
- Explore and identify thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations and behaviours a student experiences when they are anxious about school.
- Scaling or an anxiety thermometer can be helpful. For example, ask the student to rate on a scale of 1 to 10 how different school situations affect their worry level (physical environment/ area of the school building, certain lessons, times of school day, group work, etc.). This helps students identify triggers, the value given to certain factors and their potential influence on anxiety. Ask the student what needs to change for them in order for them to be able to move down one place on the anxiety scale?
- Life graph-student reflects on when their EBSA started, the context and triggers that may have changed over time.
- RAG – Red Amber Green activities – colour code or heat mapping. A student identifies aspects of the school timetable or school physical environment/school building and yard etc. and how they grade them in terms of managing worry/not managing worry at schools.
- Talk about an ideal classroom/school activity – student draws, describes or builds a model to demonstrate their ideal classroom or school. This activity helps identify elements of school (lessons, physical environment, people) that the student would like to change and why.
- West Sussex Educational Psychology Service (2019) has developed a useful tool for understanding a CYP's worries about school 'Are you feeling sad or worried about school?' (See Appendix 4)

- Staffordshire County Council (2020) has a card-sorting activity to elicit a CYP's views. See *Staffordshire County Council EBSA Guidance for Educational Settings*.
- The NEPS "My Thoughts About School Checklists" (for younger children) or the "What's going on?" questionnaire for older students are also useful resources for eliciting a CYP's viewpoint (See Appendix 5)

Gathering information from Parents

- Focus on building a collaborative relationship with the students' family. There may be issues within the family context which are contributing to the EBSA behaviour and parents may be reluctant to talk about this.
- Ask about their child's strengths, interests and hopes for the future.
- Ask about what their child was like when they were younger. How did they find starting primary/secondary school? Any history of learning, language, behaviour or social difficulties?
- Ask about the family context. Who lives with the student? Who do they get along best with? Have there been any recent changes in the family? Any significant life events, illnesses, losses, bereavement in the family? These all put EBSA behaviour in context.
- Ask what the student says about school to their family. Which staff or students do they talk about, get along with, don't get along with. What worries them about school? What do they like about school?
- Ask about the anxious behaviour. What does anxiety look like at home? What happens on a day a student is anxious and doesn't go to school? Look for exceptions-what about days when the student is anxious but still goes to school? What happens on those days? How has the student coped on those days?
- Check how the EBSA is affecting the family and what they need to cope.

Gathering information from School Staff

- Seek out perspectives from a variety of staff and include non-teaching staff as appropriate – e.g., SNAs observe things that teachers don't and vice versa.
- Questions to ask include what the student is good at and interested in at school? How do they get along with others and whether there have been any observable changes in their relationships with peers and/or staff at classroom level? What supports have been offered and what has worked/not worked?
- It's important to ask about their academic progress and any changes or concerns in this regard. Follow up on exploring academic needs in more detail, where this arises and plan for academic supports. Does the student seem overly anxious about their work, exams, etc?

- If staff have witnessed the student being upset, ask for details about this as it can give important information on triggers and the severity of the EBSA behaviour, what helps and also what may be maintaining the behaviour. For example, if you note that a student always gets to go home after being upset/crying-that may be a reaction to address and may make it more difficult for the student to build capacity to cope.

Step 2 Developing and Implementing a Plan: How can we help?

- After the information gathering and analysis process has been completed, the next step is to develop a “Return to School” or support plan (See Appendix 6 for sample Return to School Plan template). Alternatively, the NEPS Student Support Plan template may be useful (See Appendix 3).
- It may be useful at this point to organise a meeting between school, parents/ guardians and the CYP to identify and discuss the issues. Try to make this as comfortable as possible. Emphasise the collaborative nature of this work. Use language like...work together , your views are important to this ...we ...
- Start with the information that was gathered. These are the ingredients of the next step.
- Identify possible causes of the school avoidance with the student and family. Check for clarity... are we saying that ...?
- Learning or social needs may be identified, and the school and family should seek to address these barriers with interventions.
- All plans need to be co-produced with the young person, parents, and school staff. It is important that all parties are aware of the plan and sign up to it.
- Each plan will look different according to the actions indicated by the assessment. Personalised plans are crucial because what works for one child may not work for another.
- The plans should always be realistic and achievable, incorporating small steps, with the aim of reintegrating the young person.
- A plan for re-entry to school should be agreed with the young person, their parents/guardians and the school team. The return may need to be gradual and graded and there should be a recognition by all that a “quick fix” is not always possible.
- All teachers and school staff should be made aware of the plan and briefed on anxiety- related issues if present. For example, staff may be told not to ask the young person why they have not been in class etc.
- The student should be helped to identify staff members they feel safest with who can support them throughout the return process.

Any additional support strategies should be implemented as soon as the student begins the return to school. These strategies may include some of the following:

- Identify a buddy/mentor or preferred staff member to meet the CYP on their first day back. The peer/mentor can be asked to ensure that the young person is included in group at lunch time etc. Ask young person if it might be helpful to brief peers on the return to school and encourage them to be supportive with no questioning etc.
- Where possible, a quiet space could be designated for the young person to use as a relaxation room/areas, as required.
- Regular phone contact between parents/ guardians and school.
- A record of attendance and time spent in school should be kept by the school.
- A part-time or reduced timetable may be necessary to support this process but should always be temporary and not a long-term option as all children are entitled to a full-time education.
- Help the young person develop feelings of safety and belonging – e.g. having consistent support staff/welcoming space in school, providing opportunities for interaction without the pressure to talk.
- Promote confidence, self-esteem and value through personalised rewards or responsibility.
- Build on strengths and interests.
- Opportunities for positive experiences/develop friendships.
- Peer mentoring system to provide guidance and encouragement.
- Enable young person to establish or maintain peer relationships – Zoom social meetings/ continued access to after school activities.
- Positive and nurturing environment with person-centred and solution focused approach with focus on listening to young person.
- Identify key adult for young person who has time to dedicate to building genuine relationship and can support young person at times of high anxiety.
- Flexible and individualised approach-e.g., flexible and reduced timetable.
- Ensure that the young person knows what time they are going home and who is collecting them etc. if on a reduced day.
- Awareness of barriers to learning – work should be achievable and delivered at appropriate level.
- Provision of additional interventions as required, for example, social skills interventions, additional support from the Special Education Team etc.
- Provide opportunities for the young person to express their views and feel listened to.
- Investigate how to support the journey to and from school. It is important that the young person is escorted to school and that an identified staff member/close friend meets the young person to ease the transition into the school building.

Once the plan has been developed, the next step is to put the plan into action. If early progress is made, continue to stick to the plan. It is important to build in a clear review mechanism. If needed, a review can be brought forward so the plan can be altered and any progress celebrated. Remember “small steps”!!

Reviewing the Plan-Did it work?

The review meeting provides an opportunity to monitor and celebrate progress made, consider new information and plan next steps. Plans may need to be maintained or adapted to incorporate new outcomes or actions. The review is also an opportunity to identify if there needs to be further consultation with, or referrals to other agencies. It should be noted that the review process is intended to be cyclical rather than linear in nature and the practice of problem-solving may be a regular occurrence. As part of the review process, it is important to discuss the parts of the plan that have worked well and examine why these supports have been effective. Examining the barriers preventing progress, considering possible solutions and thinking about other supports that may be helpful is also essential.

What if this plan is not working or has not progressed?

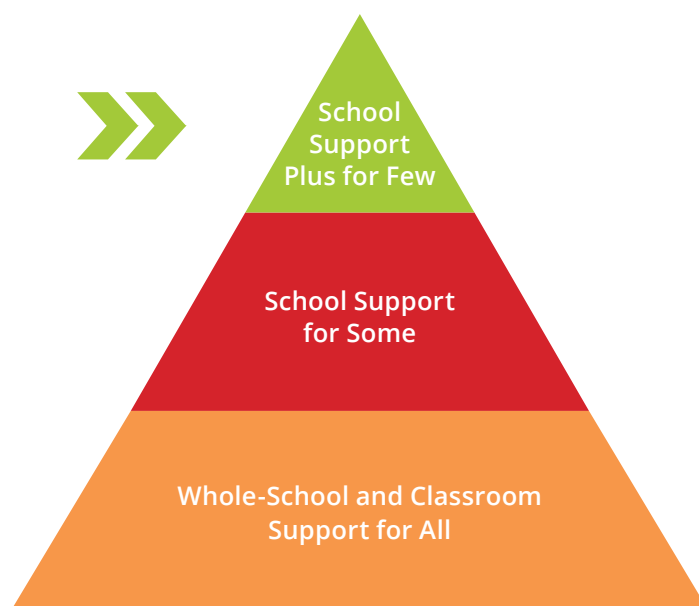
All supports currently in place should be reviewed and if additional supports are needed, they should be identified and implemented early. If it is felt that all supports and resources have been exhausted at the School Support level and that a more individualised and intensive approach is needed, it may be necessary to move to the School Support Plus stage of the Continuum of Support.

School Support Plus/ Support for a Few (more Intensive and Individualised Approaches)

The School Support Plus process will generally require more intensive and individualised supports and may involve external professionals and support services in a more detailed problem-solving process to help the pupil experiencing EBSA. School Support Plus applies to those pupils whose needs are enduring and/or severe and complex and whose progress with EBSA is considered inadequate despite carefully planned and reviewed interventions detailed in the Classroom Support and/or School Support plans.



Figure 12: School “Support for a Few” Level



Initiating School Support Plus/Support for a Few Level

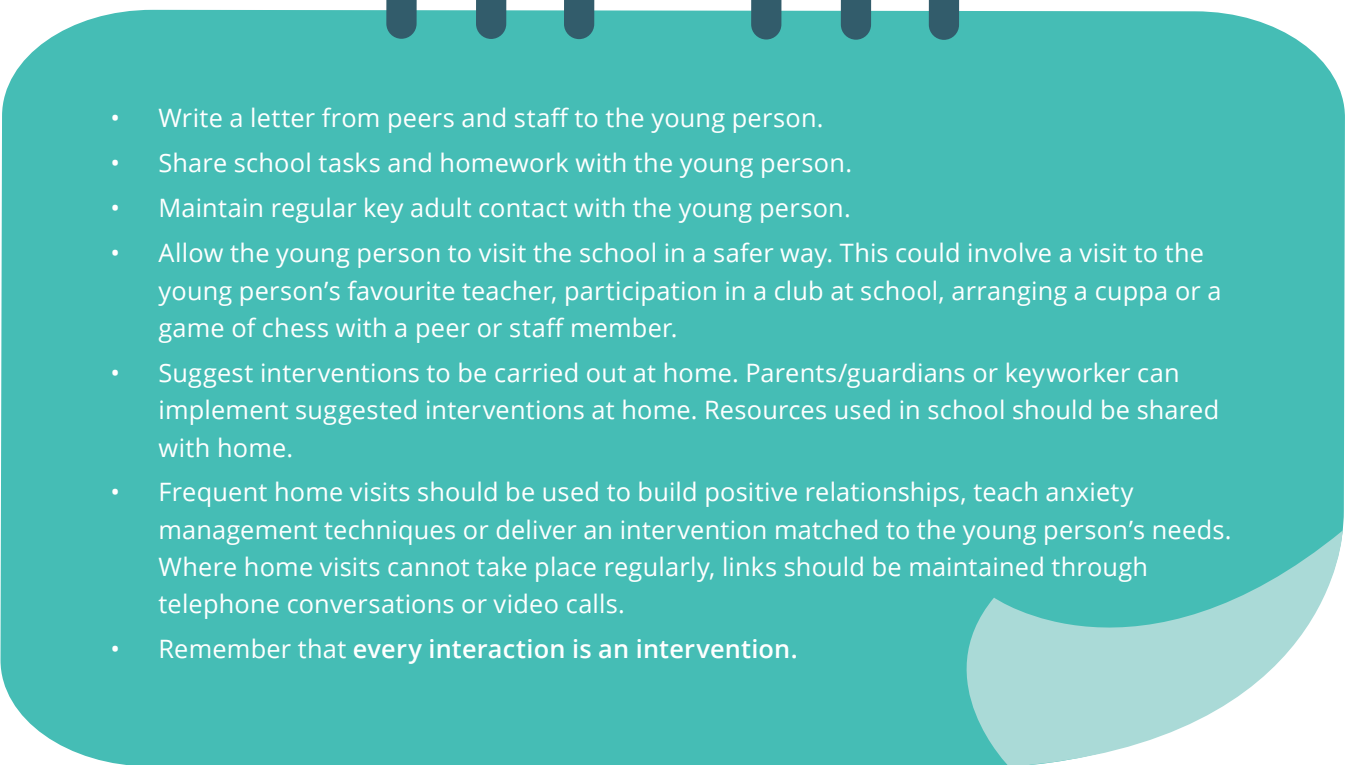
The NEPS problem-solving framework can again be utilised to guide the information-gathering, intervention planning and review process at the School Support Plus stage. At this stage, schools may decide to continue with the interventions already in place and to build on and add to these interventions and strategies. Alternatively, the team may feel that a change in approach is required. Moving into the School Support Plus stage of the Continuum of Support is characterised by a more bespoke, individualised and intensive support plan for the target student. This may include drawing on an increased range of supports available within the school, creating a more flexible, individualised plan and seeking support from other agencies and services. Again, it is important that all relevant parties, including school staff, family and the CYP, are involved in co-producing the new plan.

Interventions and Strategies at the School Support Plus/Support for a Few Level

The following interventions and strategies may be implemented at the School Support Plus level:

- Revisiting approaches that have worked well with the CYP such as, mapping the landscape, creating a safe space, psycho-education for anxiety, the use of laddering approaches etc.
- Introducing new strategies that have not been previously adopted. See suggested strategies as mentioned at the School Support level.
- Assessing the young person's anxiety levels through scaling or the use of another assessment method. This could be a rewarding way of measuring progress or simply a pointer to adapt a plan or intervention.
- Considering whether additional Special Education Teaching (SET) or Special Needs Assistant (SNA) support could be provided to support the young person experiencing EBSA.
- Developing a reintegration plan for the student. This helps the young person to see what action can be taken by themselves, by school and by their family to support their reintegration. The support plan can include agreed information about timetable changes, key adults, strategies to help reduce anxieties, ways that friends and family can help and information about a safe place. It is crucial that all staff are aware of the young person's difficulties and agreements that are included in the support plan. (See Appendix 6 for a return to school support plan).
- Drawing on all available supports and resources that may be available within the school, that are not already involved, where relevant, for example, School Completion Programme, Guidance Counsellor, Home School Community Liaison (where these supports are available within a school).
- In the event that additional supports are required, they should be identified and implemented as soon as possible. This may include involvement with NEPS and/or Tusla Family Support Services.

At the School Support Plus stage, children and young people may be experiencing significant levels of EBSA where their difficulties and behaviours have become entrenched. It may be that in some cases, the young person continues to struggle to attend school over a longer period and will require a more flexible approach to their support and interventions. This may include some support work at the young person's home. Where possible, it is important to maintain links and a sense of connection and belonging with the child and family. This is achievable through the following strategies;

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- Write a letter from peers and staff to the young person.
 - Share school tasks and homework with the young person.
 - Maintain regular key adult contact with the young person.
 - Allow the young person to visit the school in a safer way. This could involve a visit to the young person's favourite teacher, participation in a club at school, arranging a cuppa or a game of chess with a peer or staff member.
 - Suggest interventions to be carried out at home. Parents/guardians or keyworker can implement suggested interventions at home. Resources used in school should be shared with home.
 - Frequent home visits should be used to build positive relationships, teach anxiety management techniques or deliver an intervention matched to the young person's needs. Where home visits cannot take place regularly, links should be maintained through telephone conversations or video calls.
 - Remember that **every interaction is an intervention.**

When faced with significant challenges, it is normal for some school staff to feel powerless to support change. Due to the complex nature of EBSA no fixed "assessment process" can be followed. However, in all cases it is essential that the views of the young person, the family and key school personnel are gathered and listened to. There should be no expectation that the problem will be fixed overnight or by a single person. Celebrate success no matter how small and look to making those gradual changes if the EBSA case seems stuck.

Further Reading/Resources

- West Sussex Educational Psychology Service has developed a useful Whole-School Audit, which can facilitate schools in identifying areas of strength and areas for development in relation to school culture and ethos and school systems, policies and practices that foster emotional resilience and help to prevent EBSA (Appendix 7). It can also be located at the West Sussex County Council Educational Psychology website (<https://schools.westsussex.gov.uk>)
- The NBSS has developed a transition and transfer programme for incoming first years called Belonging Plus+. Further information is available at the NBSS website (nbss.ie).
- NEPS has also developed a range of resources and guidelines to assist with the transition process, which are all available to download from the NEPS platform of the gov.ie website.

NEPS Useful resources;

- A Continuum of Support for Primary Schools located at
- <https://www.sess.ie/special-education-teacher-allocation/primary/continuum-support-primary>
- A Continuum of Support for Post Primary Schools located at <https://www.sess.ie/special-education-teacher-allocation/post-primary/continuum-support-post-primary>
- Universal evidence-based interventions for wellbeing promotion and emotional resilience-building located at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/a9118-catalogue-of-wellbeing-resources-for-schools/>
- Student Support Teams More information and details on Student Support teams can be found on gov.ie and by emailing Neps_Wexford@education.gov.ie

Other resources

HSE Emotional Wellbeing Resources for Post Primary school teachers located at www.hse.ie

More information and details on FRIENDS programmes can be found on: www.friendsresilience.org and training may be available through NEPS and the local Education Centre (check out the ESCI website).