



# Emotionally Based School Avoidance (Resource Pack)

Kent Educational Psychology Service

## Emotionally Based School Avoidance Resources

Resources produced by West Sussex EPS include:

[https://westsussex.local-offer.org/information\\_pages/460-emotionally-based-school-avoidance](https://westsussex.local-offer.org/information_pages/460-emotionally-based-school-avoidance)

- Information Gathering and Integration

Resources produced by Buckinghamshire EPS include:

<https://familyinfo.buckinghamshire.gov.uk/education-and-learning/improving-your-childs-school-attendance/emotionally-based-school-avoidance-ebsa/ebsa-guidance-for-parents-and-carers/>

- Managing separation anxiety
- Morning and Evening plans

Resources produced by Brighter Futures include:

<https://brighterfuturesforchildren.org/professionals/emotionally-based-school-avoidance/>

- Capturing your child's EBSA needs

## Understanding EBSA

What is **Emotionally Based School Avoidance**? When a child or young person:

- Has extreme **difficulty attending school due to anxiety** or other emotional factors, often resulting in long absences from school.
- **Severe emotional reactions** when attempting to go to school – fearfulness, anxiety, bad temper, misery, physical symptoms, low self-confidence
- Stays at home during school hours with **parents knowledge**.
- **Absence of anti-social behaviour** – destructiveness, stealing etc.

Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) is a broad umbrella term used to describe a group of children and young people who experience significant and enduring challenges in attending school due to emotional factors, mainly feelings of fear and anxiety.

The EBSA is more than just a child or young person's perceived dislike for school it is used to describe a group of children and young people who have severe difficulty attending school due to emotional factors.

This umbrella term covers both those children who have stopped attending school altogether, but also includes children who experience high levels of anxiety about attending school, who struggle to attend regularly, or struggle to attend certain lessons, or other parts of school life.

For some children their EBSA is obvious due to their chronic non-attendance, but for others their pattern of EBSA may be less obvious, school staff may just begin to notice the odd day missed here, or multiple lessons missed, These could be the first early warning signs that alert parents and school staff that the CYP is experiencing difficulties when attending school.

It is also important to highlight that children could be attending school consistently but still be attending school – they might be experiencing all the symptoms of EBSA but still attending, potentially due to robust school support/ home-school partnerships, resiliency, we need to recognise that there is a lot of variety in the children who experience EBSA – attendance or non-attendance may vary, and is not a requirement for experiencing EBSA difficulties.

# EBSA as a spectrum of needs

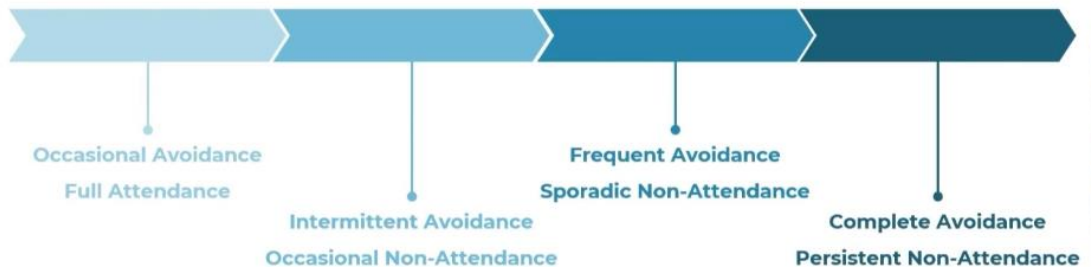


Image taken from Dr. Jerricah Holder's training: Working to support entrenched EBSA needs.

We need to reconceptualise EBSA not as a black and white definition but as a spectrum of needs – on the one side, children experiencing some EBSA but still managing to attend full time consistently moving through to patterns of non-attendance that are beginning to emerge then through to others whose non-attendance is chronic and persistent.

We need to broaden our view of attendance, be curious of patterns, key transitions and how attendance changes over time to gain insight in how children are experiencing EBSA.

We also need to recognise a child's EBSA needs regardless of their current attendance status and also to try and identify the early warning signs so we can address EBSA needs before they become entrenched, and cycles of anxiety become maintained

We are particularly choosing to use the term 'avoidance' because refusal implies that the young person is in control and manipulative, rather than experiencing an emotional barrier.

EBSA is conceptualised as something distinct from truancy.

School avoidance as opposed to truancy, is characterised by internalised problems such as fear and anxiety, misery, complaints of feeling ill without obvious cause, reluctance to leave home, or externalised problems including tantrums and oppositional behaviour. Moreover, there is an absence of significant anti-social behaviour. Such children rarely present as obvious management problems to school and their difficulties can go undetected until unwillingness to attend school becomes marked.

## Experience of Anxiety

Anxiety is normal. Everyone experiences anxiety from time to time. It can be helpful to consider the ways we ourselves experience anxiety, to help us think more clearly about how best to support others.

<b>Bring to mind a time when you felt really stressed or under pressure</b>
How would you describe your feelings at this time?
<i>e.g. frustrated, worried, fearful, panicked</i>
What thoughts came into your mind at this time?
<i>e.g. 'I can't do this', 'Everything is going to go wrong'</i>
How did your body feel?
<i>e.g. racing heartbeat, feeling sick</i>
What did you do to help yourself cope at this time?
<i>e.g. had a cup of tea, talked to friend</i>

## The Four Factors that Impact EBSA

There is no single cause of EBSA. However, research suggests there tends to be *four main reasons* why children and young people experience EBSA (Kearney & Silberman, 1990)

- 1) To avoid uncomfortable feelings brought on by situations at school, e.g. fear of the toilets, busyness in corridors between classes, exams
- 2) To avoid social situations that are stressful at school, e.g. bullying, reading out loud in class, working as part of a group, being left out
- 3) To reduce separation anxiety or gain or maintain attention from significant others, e.g. family members.
- 4) To pursue tangible reinforcers outside of school, e.g. playing video games, going shopping, other enjoyable activities etc.

*“EBSA usually occurs when stress exceeds support, which risks are greater than resilience and when ‘pull factors’ that promote school non-attendance overcome the ‘push’ factors to encourage attendance”*

**Thambirajah et al., 2008**

## The Push-Pull Framework

We can think about the Four Factors in terms of which act to:

Push the child away from school or

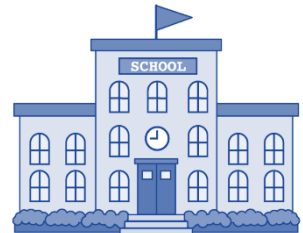
Pull the child towards the home

And use this to form a personalised intervention where we encourage a Pull back to school and a gentle Push away from home to break the anxiety maintenance cycle.

It is often the case that there are early warning signs and risk factors that indicate that the child is beginning to struggle, it is so important to tune into the picture over time in order to understand the current picture of non-attendance and also ensure we pick up the children who are at risk in order to put in early intervention.



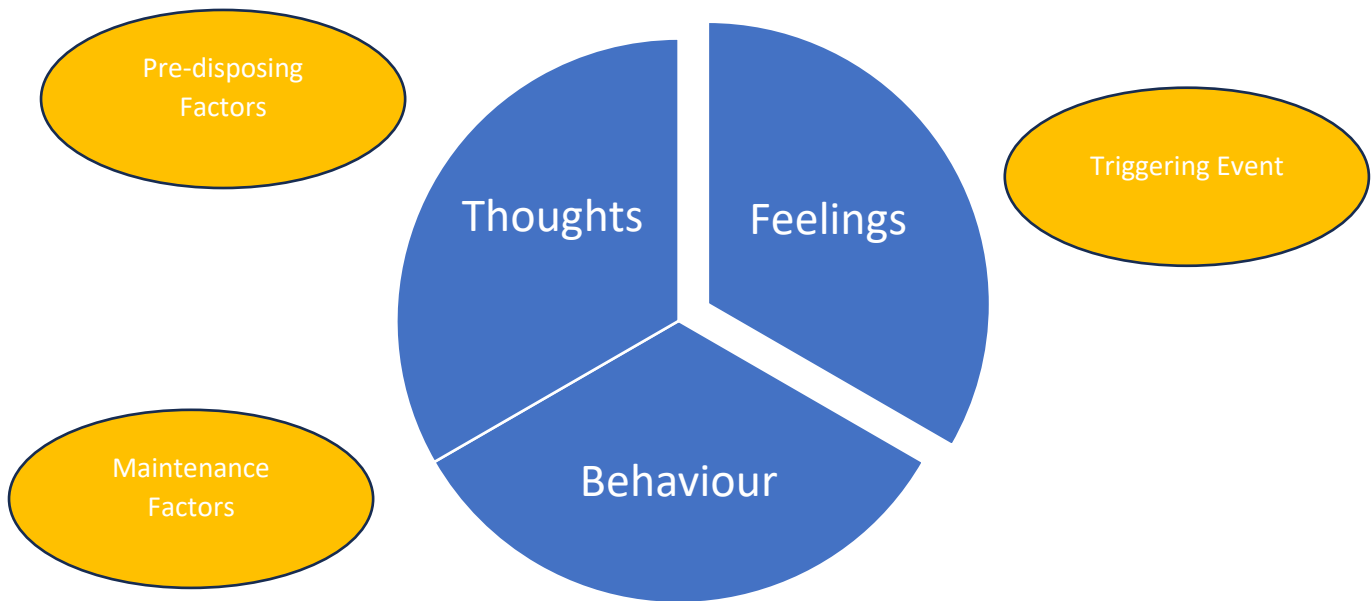
# Push and Pull Factors



**We can think about the four factors in terms of which act to Push the child away from school or Pull the child towards home.**

**We can then try and consider what factors can work to Pull the child back to school and Push the child out of their home (place of comfort in order to break the anxiety maintenance cycle)**

## The Integrated Model of EBSA Over time and the Anxiety Cycle



We can see the role of maintenance factors in sustaining the EBSA and contributing to the maintenance of the anxiety cycle.



## Gathering Information with your Child

### Talking About Anxiety

It is important to:

Let them know **you want to know** how they think and feel  
**Avoid dismissing anxieties** or worries your child might have  
Find sensitive, **child-centred** ways of gaining their views

- Ask your child to think about their thoughts and feelings about going to school...

*'If these feelings had a name what would you call them?'*

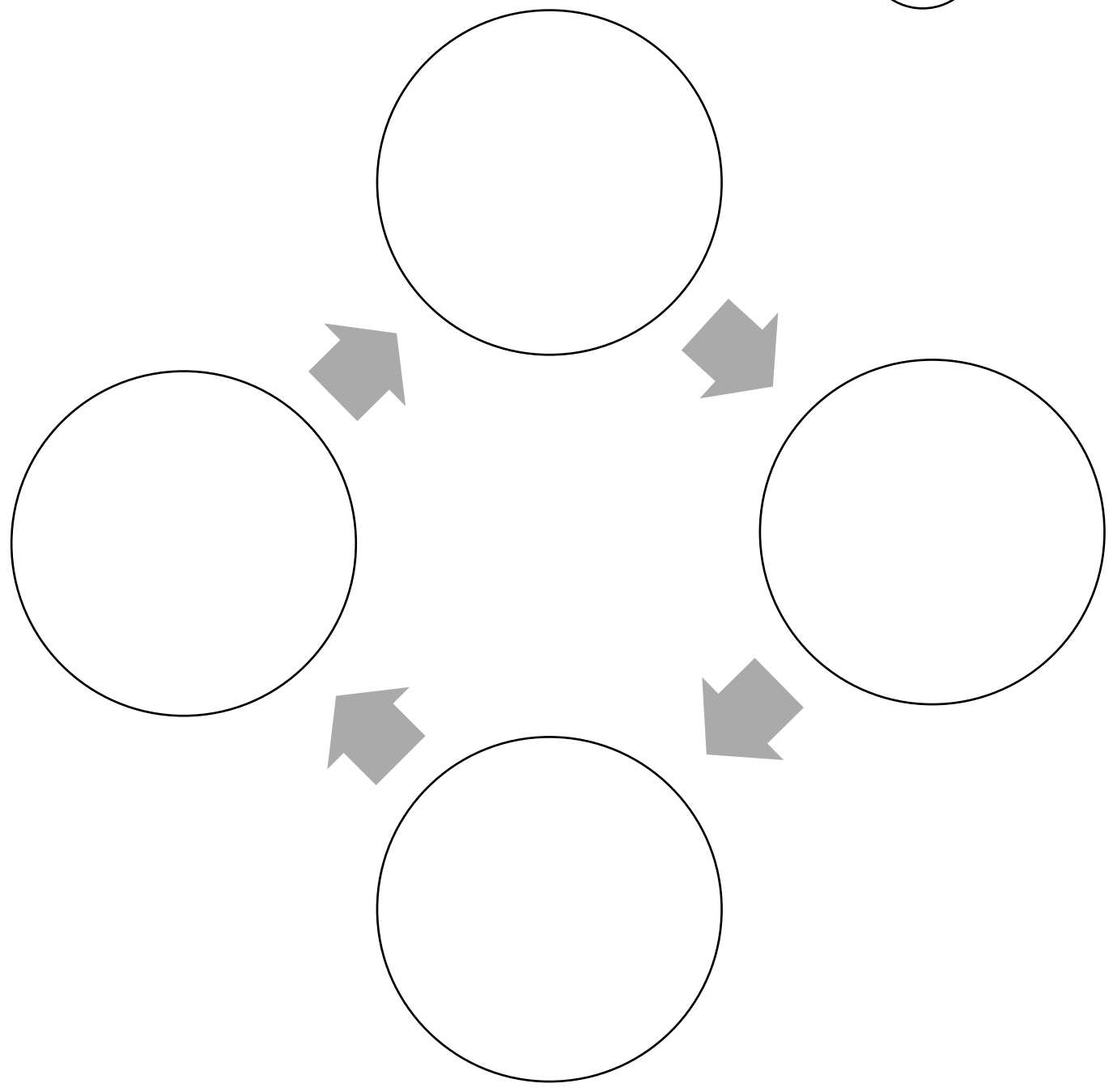
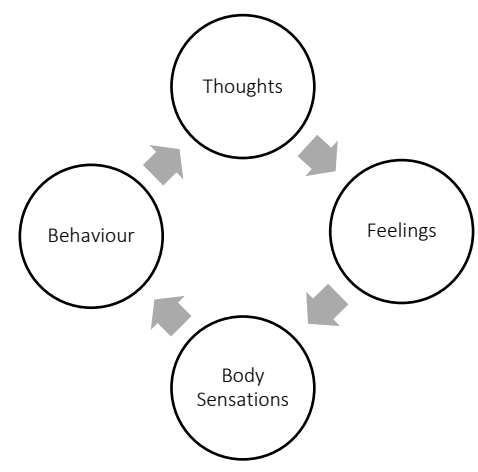
*'If it was a thing, what would it look like?'*

*'Can you draw it?'*

- Ask them to draw how their bodies feel when they are worried or anxious.

## Learning about Anxiety

Use this diagram to explore the thoughts, feelings, body sensations and behaviours that occur in difficult situations at school



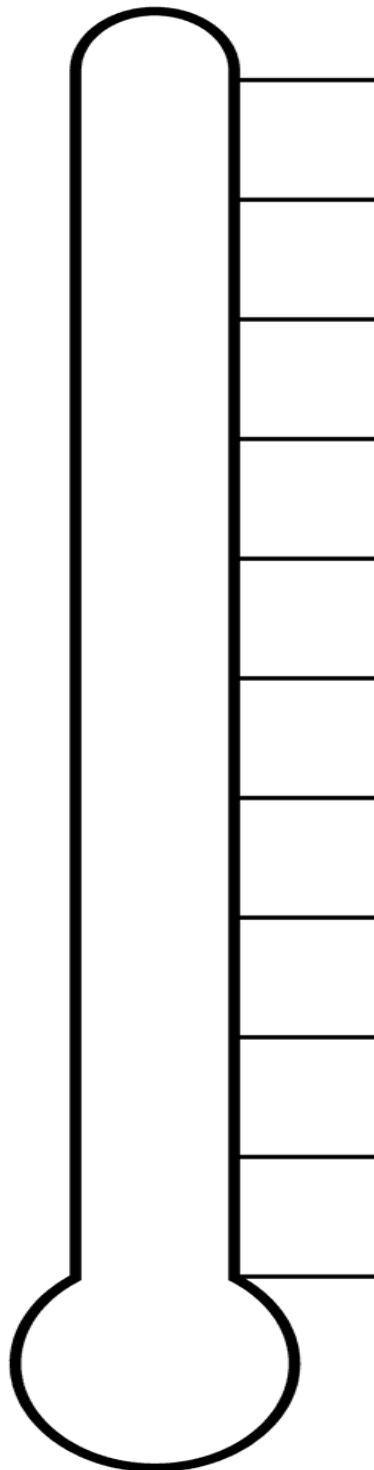
## Feelings Thermometer

This is a tool to help children express and rate their worries and feelings. Questions can then be asked to help them to think of ways to reduce the worry or feeling.

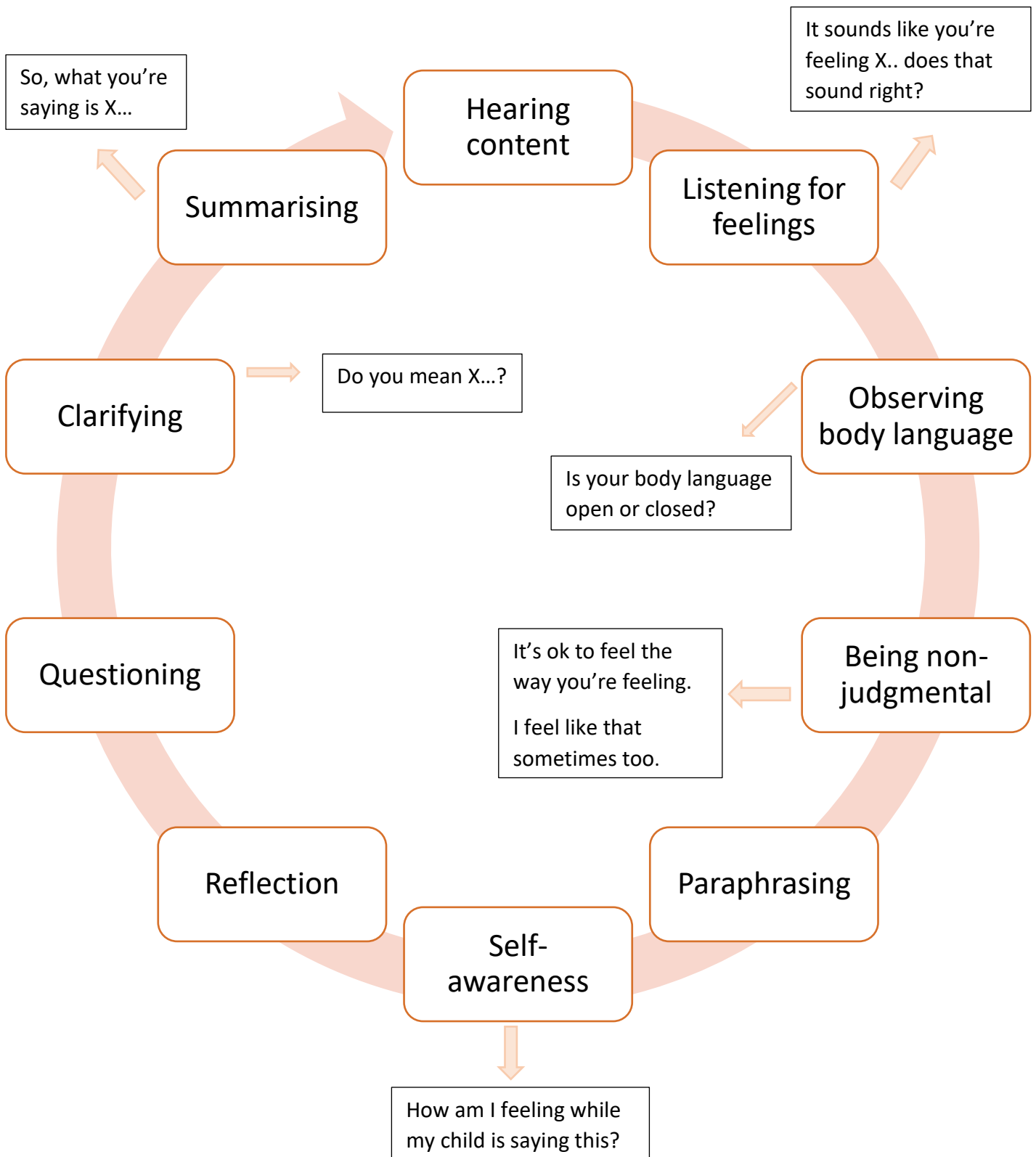
### For example:

Where would you rate yourself on the thermometer when you're at home/at school?

What might help you get lower on the feelings thermometer?



# Active Listening



## Capturing your Child's EBSA Needs

School

Home & Family

Health

Friendships

Other

## Managing Separation Anxiety

Separation anxiety is excessive fear or worry about separation from home or someone such as a parent or carer. A child may withdraw from the situation to avoid becoming overwhelmed. It can lead to school avoidance.

To support your child, it is important that they:

- feel safe and secure at home
- have trust for people other than a parent or carer
- know that their parent or carer will come back to them

### How to help a child with separation anxiety

<b>Have regular opportunities to experience small separations</b>	Begin with a small situation and build over time at a pace that is right for your child. This will increase confidence over time.
<b>Make goodbye normal</b>	When handing over to a trusted adult, say goodbye with loving words or a hug. Let them know when you will be back and what you will do together. Keep goodbyes calm and brief, and tell them they will be ok.
<b>Leave a reminder</b>	Give them an object that will comfort them such as a small toy, note or photo.
<b>Come back on time</b>	If you are unable to come back on time, try to call and let your child know so that they are not anxious
<b>Playtime</b>	Help your child to play with toys or dolls, that can be with an adult who makes them feel safe.

## Sunday and Monday Plans

Mondays are often hard: it can help to have evening and morning routines to get your child ready for the school day. Think about a positive routine that can start on Sunday evening and maybe plan something for them to look forward to. The plan could be made with your child so they can give you their thoughts and ideas. You can make plans visual with pictures or photographs if this helps.

The following suggestions have been adapted from Dr. Tina Rae's "Sunday evening/Monday morning".

### Sunday plans

**Soothe** Think about calming activities you can do with your child before they go to bed, such as naming 3 positive things about their day or listening to a sleep story / gentle music. Breathing exercises or mindfulness meditation can also help to calm the nervous system before going to sleep.

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**Understand** Reassure your child that you understand how difficult it is and that their feelings are valid.

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**Neutralise** Encourage your child to share their worries (ideally a few hours before bed) and talk through each one of them together. Drawing or writing in a journal or worry book can support this. Help them come to solutions or just listen and comfort them. Challenge any irrational thoughts by highlighting the evidence against them.

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**Decide** Discuss what a successful day would look like and consider with your child what needs to happen in the evening to make it successful. Look through their schedule together, step-by-step, and make sure they have everything ready and laid out for the morning, for example, books, uniform, and PE kit.

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**Attend** Be aware of your child's emotional state and be more attentive to them if needed. Consider using a transitional object with a younger child.

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**Yourself** Ensure you feel calm and schedule time for your own self-soothing activities.

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## Monday plans

**Organise** Ensure you feel organised and ready in the morning. For example, your own bag is packed, and breakfast is set out so that you are available to support your child in a calm way.

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**Neutralise** Allow time to speak with your child about their worries. Help them come to solutions or just listen and comfort. Challenge any irrational thoughts by highlighting the evidence against them.

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**Decide** Go through the morning plan with them to get them into school. Clearly tell them how they will go to school, for example, the form of transport, who they will go with, and the route they will take, so they feel prepared and certain about what will happen when they leave for school.

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**Accept** Attune to your child's emotional state and reassure them that they are loved and safe. Remind them that their feelings are valid, and it is okay to feel worried. Let them know that you will help to manage their worries. You might consider having a transitional object.

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**Manage** Take time out to manage your own emotional state and use self-soothing strategies. Remind yourself of the following script 'if I stay calm, I will make him / her feel safe.'

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## **Parent Support**

### **Local Services and Websites**

Kent Parent and Carer Together (PACT)

[www.kent.gov.uk/education-and-children/special-educational-needs/support-services-to-help-families-with-send-children/parent-support-groups](http://www.kent.gov.uk/education-and-children/special-educational-needs/support-services-to-help-families-with-send-children/parent-support-groups)

Kent Resilience Hub

[www.kentresiliencehub.org.uk/supporting-your-child](http://www.kentresiliencehub.org.uk/supporting-your-child)

Parent support groups and services

[www.kent.gov.uk/education-and-children/special-educational-needs/support-services-to-help-families-with-send-children/parent-support-groups](http://www.kent.gov.uk/education-and-children/special-educational-needs/support-services-to-help-families-with-send-children/parent-support-groups)

Early Help

[www.kent.gov.uk/education-and-children/early-help-support-for-families](http://www.kent.gov.uk/education-and-children/early-help-support-for-families)

### **School Attendance Support**

Not Fine in School

[www.notfineinschool.co.uk](http://www.notfineinschool.co.uk)

Square Peg

[www.teamsquarepeg.org](http://www.teamsquarepeg.org)

### **Mental Health Support**

Youngminds

[www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk), 0808 802 5544

Kooth

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

Anna Freud

[www.annafreud.org](http://www.annafreud.org)

Mind

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

### **Other Support**

Autism Education Trust

[School Exclusions: School Stress and Anxiety  
\(autismeducationtrust.org.uk\)](http://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk)

The Solihull Approach

<https://solihullapproachparenting.com/online-courses/>

NSPCC

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

Childline

[www.childline.org.uk/](http://www.childline.org.uk/) 0800 1111

## Appendices

### *Push and Pull Factors*

School	Home
Push	Pull
Pull	Push

## Hierarchy of Feared Situations

Think of all the situations and objects you are fearful of. Ask yourself:

- Are there any situations or objects you would like to stop avoiding?
- What sorts of things do you do that help reduce the level of fear?
- Is there anything about the situation/ that would make it less intense for you?

When you're ready, add them to the table in order of how worrying they are. In the last column, rate how worried each situation/object makes you feel, from 1 (not worried) to 100 (extremely worried).

<b>Rank</b>	<b>Situation</b>	<b>Worry rating 1 - 100</b>

## FACE: Overcoming Avoidance

Overcome your anxiety by learning to FACE the situations you normally avoid.

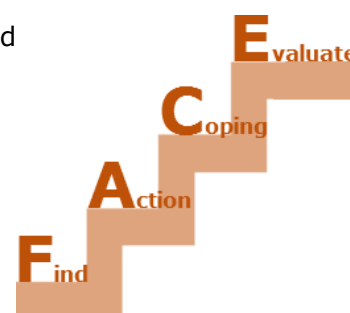


**F**ind and identify your target – what you would to be able to face, rather than avoid

**A**ction – decide on the steps you need to take

**C**oping – identify and use your coping strategies

**E**valuate – how did it go?



### FIND

Identify what you would like to be able to FACE, rather than avoid. You could write a list of several targets to face, then choose one that is not too distressing. You can gradually work through the list, from least distressing to most distressing.

### ACTION

Decide on the steps you need to take. Break it down into manageable chunks, like steps on a step ladder leading up to the top or BIG one. Take one step at a time, starting at the bottom.



### COPING

Write down all your coping strategies and use those that are going to be most useful for that situation.

### EVALUATE

After you've actioned the steps, review how things went. What went well? What didn't go so well? What could you do differently next time?

Decide whether you need to repeat this step, or move up to the next step.

# Stepladder for Success

Goal:

Step 6:

[Purple bar]

*Reward:*

Step 5:

[Orange bar]

*Reward:*

Step 4:

[Green bar]

*Reward:*

Step 3:

[Pink bar]

*Reward:*

Step 2:

[Yellow bar]

*Reward:*

Step 1:

[Red bar]

*Reward:*

## Stepladder ideas

***\*Try and do each step for at least a week – if it is too hard, reduce it down a step after 3 days so it is manageable but continue to work towards the goal\****

- Coming into school a bit later and meeting familiar adult – reward can be a treat for breakfast. Just manage this for a week.
- Then try for breakfast and one lesson of my choice, think of a suitable reward (not too big a reward!)
- Coming into school to collect work – meeting teacher with Mum or Dad, then by myself.
- Talking about the work on a one-to-one level with a teacher – increase the time that I do this work (10min+).
- Coping in a small group lesson for the teacher input, then doing the independent work by myself. Gradually increase the amount of time in the lesson
- Consider X joining in for the final part of the day to have a sense of completion and gradually work backwards from there (using backward chaining).

## Stepladder Step Review

Feared situation:			Step: <i>What will I do?</i>			<i>How long for?</i>
Day	Thoughts <i>What might happen? What's the worst thing about it? How likely is this to happen?</i>	Anxiety rating 0 – 10 <i>Before</i>	Anxiety rating 0 – 10 <i>During</i>	Anxiety rating 0 – 10 <i>After</i>	Duration	Comments <i>What happened? What did you do? What helped? Did anything get in the way? What would you do differently next time?</i>