

SCHOOL AVOIDANCE AND ATTENDANCE ISSUES

This fact sheet has been written by parent carers for parent carers



Some children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) will struggle to attend school. This may be because of a mismatch between their needs and the environment or support their school can offer, or perhaps they have mental health issues that prevent them being able to learn or feel safe in school. Sometimes bullying or a traumatic incident are a tipping point. Where children or young people have severe difficulty in attending school due to emotional factors this is often called emotionally-based school avoidance or EBSA.

School avoidance can be a tricky issue to navigate for all parents but there are things that you can do to help. The tips below have been compiled by our SENDIASS team, many of whom are parent carers themselves.

Look after your child

Listen to your child and acknowledge how they feel. Let them know education is important and you will keep trying to help them get back to school, feeling more comfortable and able to learn, working with whoever can help with this.

Think about what your child enjoys and what helps them. Look for positive things you can help them do whilst they are not in school – anything that gets them out of the bedroom and feeling engaged. If there are positive links with school you can keep going, do so, for example links with school friends if they have any. Try self-help approaches to building their emotional health. See links below for good places to look for ideas.

Work with schools and services

Keep talking to school even if you feel they are not hearing you properly or taking on board what you are saying. Try not to lose patience with receiving letters or emails about non-attendance that don't recognise your child's needs or your efforts to get them in. These can sound heartless and threatening, but they are often generated automatically. The guidance for schools says they should listen to parents and children to understand the barriers to attendance they are experiencing and work together to find solutions.

Seek out the most useful people to speak to. Is it the SENCO or a pastoral lead? You are probably going to have to be persistent given the many pressures on schools. They will not immediately know whether your child is one who will get back to school with a bit of extra encouragement or pushing, versus a child whose situation and needs are more complex. The school should make a plan with you about support and the next steps.

Write a summary about your child and the issues they face that you can send to each new person or service you have to speak to, so you are not endlessly repeating yourself. Keep it short (bullet points, not an essay) but include their known needs and any that you think need more investigation, a brief timeline that shows when things changed, a list of what has been tried already by you and others and if it helped, and details of any assessments or medical input that have happened or you are waiting for. Keep it factual so it can be used in different situations.





Cooperate with the things the school or services ask you and your child to try, even if you are sceptical about whether they will work. Ultimately you will want to show that all reasonable alternatives have been tried, and sometimes things go better than we expect. On the other hand, if you think the proposed approach could be damaging for your child you need to explain why and look for evidence to back this up.

Contact your GP if mental health issues are part of the picture for your child. We all know children's mental health services are overstretched and it can be difficult to get the response you want from them, but you have to ask. At the very least you need your child's GP to be aware. Ask the school about the mental health or emotional wellbeing services they can access too.

Contact the local authority services that deal with school avoidance and find out how they should help. There are services that help with attendance issues, arrange tuition for children that are too ill to attend, and give advice about elective home education (EHE). We give links below to the key services in East Sussex and Brighton & Hove for each of these. And we produce companion fact sheets about home education, also listed below.

Understand your rights and responsibilities

Don't allow anyone to push you towards taking your child off roll at a school (AKA de-register them) and switch to Elective Home Education (EHE) to solve this problem. Home education can be a great option for families that choose this for themselves but it is not something you should do because of pressure or the threat of fines for non-attendance. It also means that you become solely responsible for meeting your child's special educational needs.

Be clear on your legal position and the school and local authority's. As a parent, you are legally responsible for making sure your child receives a suitable education by attending school or via elective home education (EHE). You can be fined or prosecuted if you don't do this, but this should not be used to punish families with a child who is unable to go to school because of SEND or health conditions. Schools must monitor attendance, work on barriers to attendance affecting your child and offer support. They should only take steps to enforce attendance if they have offered informal and formal support and you haven't engaged with this. Local authorities are expected to offer help to schools, support for families and use legal remedies for non-attendance as a last resort.

But also, local authorities have to provide alternative education, or 'education other than at school' (EOTAS) to children who are not currently receiving an education by reason of illness, exclusion or otherwise. So if you and the school have tried all the right things to help your child attend and they really can't go to school, the LA should provide them with an alternative such as home tuition or alternative provision. This is pretty clear cut when it is a physical health problem but can be trickier when it is a mental health issue or unmet SEND. Ideally, you will have evidence from a health specialist, but it can legally be from your GP in some circumstances, for example if you are on the waiting list for CAMHS. See our companion fact sheets on *EOTAS* and *EHE* and get additional information about the legal position from national advice charity IPSEA.

Don't accept a part-time arrangement as a long-term solution. Part-time timetables can be a useful tool to help a child through a tricky period or help them return to school after a gap. They should be time-limited, with a process to review and build up towards getting a full-time education. If a child is on a part-time programme longer than a period of weeks, careful thought needs to be given to whether they need different provision. Is it time to look at requesting assessment for an EHC Plan? If they already have an EHC plan, do they need a different placement now? See our Amaze SENDIASS video about informal school exclusions and part-time timetables here <https://youtu.be/k81Sjwlmpro>





Find out more about emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA), if you think this may be the best way to understand what is going on for your child. EBSA is a term used to describe children who are having serious trouble attending school due to emotional factors such as anxiety. But bear in mind that for some children what looks like EBSA is actually due to unmet SEND needs, for example if they have learning difficulties or sensory issues that have not been fully recognised or supported. There are links to more information about EBSA at the end of this fact sheet.

Look after yourself

Look for advice and support for yourself as well as your child. It can be very stressful supporting a child who is unhappy and struggling. There are many other families in a similar situation. SENDIASS can offer impartial advice about the law and local services, but why not also join a parent group to get mutual support. Our SENDIASS advisers can provide details of local and national groups, but the groups run by Amaze Parent groups and befriending are a good place to start.

Ask about

- **SENDIASS** - Amaze provides information, advice and support (IAS) to children and young people with SEND up to 25 in Sussex, and their parent carers. Our SENDIASS advisers can talk through any issues around SEND education. Call 01273 772289, email sendiass@amazesussex.org.uk or visit <https://amazesussex.org.uk/sendiass>.
- **Parent groups & befriending** - for families in Brighton & Hove and East Sussex <https://amazesussex.org.uk/parent-groups-and-befriending/>
- **Brighton & Hove City Council services**
BHISS (Brighton & Hove Inclusion Support Service) - the local inclusion support service that offers help with SEND, including behaviour and mental wellbeing <https://www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/directories/special-educational-needs-and-disability-send-support/brighton-hove-inclusion-support>
Education Other Than At School (EOTAS) - Education for children too ill for school in Brighton & Hove <https://www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/schools-and-learning/absent-school/how-we-help-children-who-are-too-ill-go-school>
Elective Home Education - see <https://www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/schools-and-learning/home-education/how-educate-your-child-home>
Schools Mental Health Service - offer a range of group therapies for children who are struggling to attend school as well as drop-ins and workshops for parent carers. Email SchoolsMentalHealthService@brighton-hove.gov.uk
- **East Sussex County Council services**
Elective Home Education (East Sussex) <https://www.eastsussex.gov.uk/education-learning/schools/attendance-behaviour/out-of-school-education>
Teaching and Learning Provision (TLP) - Education for children too ill for school in East Sussex. Visit <https://www.eastsussex.gov.uk/education-learning/schools/attendance-behaviour/too-sick>
School Health - offers therapy programmes for children struggling to attend or out of school. Call School Health One Point on 0300 123 4062 or visit <https://www.eastsussexchildren.nhs.uk/>





Further reading and useful links

- **Amaze SENDIASS** - companion fact sheets about *EOTAS, Elective Home Education, SEN support in school and EHC needs assessments and plans* at <https://amazesussex.org.uk/resources/fact-sheets/>
- **Amaze video about informal exclusions** and part-time timetables here <https://youtu.be/k81SJwImpro>
- **Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA)** - Education East Sussex download for parent carers <https://localoffer.eastsussex.gov.uk/assets/documents/EBSA-Guidance-for-Parent-Carers-and-Children-and-Young-People.pdf>
- **Gov.uk** - government information about home education <https://www.gov.uk/home-education>
- **IPSEA advice** - <https://www.ipsea.org.uk/getting-temporary-education-put-in-place>
- **Not Fine In School** – support information for families with a child facing barriers to school attendance <https://notfineinschool.co.uk/>
- **NHS advice for parents** on helping their child's mental health <https://www.nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/supporting-others/childrens-mental-health/>
- **Place2Be** - online parenting advice from child mental health experts) <https://parentingsmart.place2be.org.uk/>
- **Sussex CAMHS** parent page <https://www.sussexcamhs.nhs.uk/resources/resources-for-families-carers-and-professionals>
- **West Sussex County Council** - produces really useful information on Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) <https://schools.westsussex.gov.uk/Page/10483>
- **Young Minds** - lots of parent advice resources <https://www.youngminds.org.uk/parent>

