

Understanding school avoidance

Why some children find school too hard, and how extra tutoring can help

Emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA) · for parents and carers of primary aged children

Emotionally based school avoidance, often shortened to EBSA, describes children who find it very hard to get to school, or to stay there, because of anxiety or other strong feelings. It is **not a diagnosis**, and it is not naughtiness or truancy: most of these children want to be in school but feel unable to cope. It can start suddenly or build slowly, often around a change such as a new class, illness or a family upset. **The earlier it is noticed and worked on together, the better the outlook.**

Early signs to look out for

- Stomach aches, headaches or feeling sick on school mornings, which ease at weekends and in holidays.
- Poor sleep, or worry building on Sunday evenings and at the end of holidays.
- Tears, anger, or refusing to get dressed or leave the car.
- Arriving late, asking to come home, or long spells in the school office.
- Patchy attendance, especially on Mondays or days with particular lessons.

Why it happens

There is rarely one cause. It helps to think about what pushes a child away from school and what pulls them towards home.

Pushing away from school

Learning needs that have not been spotted or met, sensory overload, friendship problems or bullying, fear of getting things wrong.

Pulling towards home

Worry about a parent or sibling, separation anxiety, a loss or change at home, or simply that home feels safe and predictable.

Why it can snowball

Staying home brings instant relief, which teaches the brain that school is dangerous. Gaps in learning then add a new worry, so each missed day can make the next one harder.

Can't, not won't

You may hear the older term "school refusal". Many families and professionals now avoid it because it suggests a choice. For most children this is about **panic**, **not defiance**, and pressure or punishment on its own usually makes it worse.

Who is more likely to be affected

Autistic children, children with ADHD, a PDA profile or unidentified learning needs, and children facing change at home. Many have **masked** their difficulties at school for a long time first (see our sheet on autism).

What helps most

Acting early, keeping a connection with school, and working with the school rather than against it. Recovery is usually gradual: a series of small steps, not a single day.

Working with school

Tell the school early and ask to meet the class teacher and SENCo. Ask for a written plan covering mornings, a named trusted adult, a safe space and, if needed, a gradual return. Make sure the real reason for absence is recorded; schools should not usually need medical evidence for an absence linked to mental health.

If your child cannot attend at all

Where a child will miss 15 school days or more for health reasons, the council has a duty to arrange suitable education. SENDIASS (overleaf) can explain how this works.

"Every child learns, some just need a different path."

Nicola, Moss Grove Tutoring

Why one to one makes a difference

When school has become linked with worry, learning often stops altogether. Sessions at home, with one calm and trusted adult, separate learning from the things your child fears. Many children rediscover that they **can** learn, and that is often the first step back.

What sessions look like

- **Calm and predictable:** the same time each week, with a clear start and finish.
- **Confidence first:** starting with work your child can do, so success comes early.
- **Gaps filled quietly**, so falling behind is one less reason to fear going back.
- **Worries noticed, not forced:** Nicola watches for signs of anxiety and adjusts the pace.
- **Interests and choices** built in wherever possible.
- **Small steps towards school** if the school's plan includes them, such as practising routines or the topic the class is covering.

Part of the plan, not instead of school

For almost every child the goal is a return to school. Nicola will want to understand the school's plan and fit around it. Tutoring should keep learning going and rebuild confidence; it should never become a reason to stay at home.

Working together

You know your child best. Before starting, Nicola will ask what has happened so far, what helps and what makes things worse. A short update follows each session, and with your permission she can link with your child's teacher or SENCo so that everyone is working to the same plan.

Being realistic

Tutoring cannot fix school anxiety on its own, and it is not a substitute for support from school, health services or the council. It can keep learning going, rebuild confidence and remove one source of worry while the wider plan is put in place.

Small things that help at home

- On hard mornings stay calm and warm: name the feeling, then keep to the routine.
- Keep school days looking like school days: up, dressed, limited screens.
- Prepare the night before, so mornings need fewer decisions.
- Talk about worries at quiet times, not at the school gate. Drawing or scoring worries out of ten can help.
- Celebrate small steps; getting to the gate counts.
- Look after yourself too. This is exhausting for parents.

Getting more help

See your GP if anxiety is affecting sleep, eating or daily life. Ask the school about the Educational Psychology service or a mental health support team, and speak to SENDIASS if you think unmet SEN may be part of the cause.

Where to find out more

Not Fine in School: notfineinschool.co.uk

YoungMinds parents helpline: youngminds.org.uk

Square Peg: teamsquarepeg.org

SENDIASS: free, impartial advice on SEN support in school. Search "SENDIASS" with Gloucestershire or Herefordshire.

About Nicola

Nicola has worked in primary schools since 2003 and has been a Higher Level Teaching Assistant since 2008, specialising in special educational needs, including running nurture groups.