Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA)

Guidance for Warwickshire schools and settings, including whole-school approaches to promote wellbeing and support attendance.

CHILD FRIENDLY WARWICKSHIRE

Warwickshire County Council

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Introduction

In this document you will find an outline of the universal provision expected as part of the graduated approach to special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and inclusion within Warwickshire schools and education settings, with particular reference to Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA).

It highlights whole-school approaches and preventative strategies as essential for establishing good school attendance and reducing barriers to education across all settings.

You will also find guidance on using an audit tool to evaluate your school's inclusivity, planning and prevention work.

Whole school preventative and proactive approaches for supporting EBSNA

Supporting children and young people's (CYP) **school attendance** and **access to education** starts with a focus on **wellbeing**, **inclusion** and **safety**.

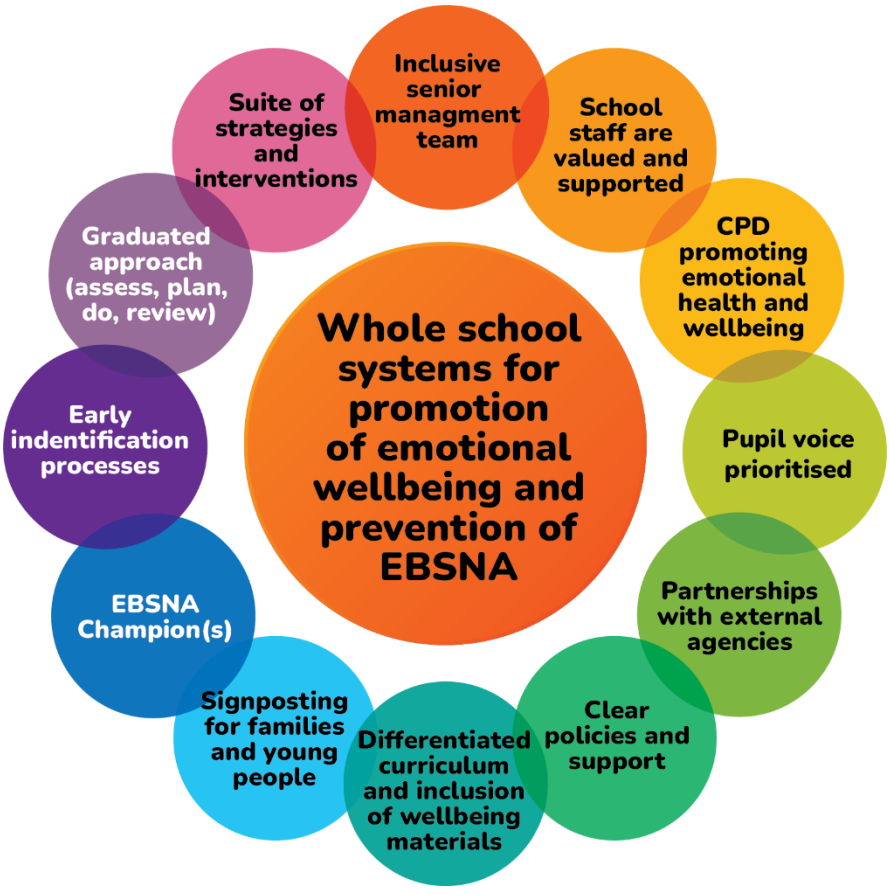


Safety in school begins with **whole-school culture and ethos**. It is important that all CYP feel welcome in school, inclusive of their background, culture, needs, previous experiences and current circumstances. They should feel that the school is a **place made for them**. This means that they feel connected and part of the whole school community, whilst receiving warmth and acceptance from staff who are genuinely glad that they are in their school. An essential component to this, is helping CYP feel that they have a voice within school – both in relation to their personal support, but also regarding broader school matters.

Building a school system which focuses on supporting CYP to feel emotionally secure, happy and listened to creates the foundation for them to thrive within education. A direct focus on increasing attendance figures should be a secondary focus when shaping the school system. For wider reading in this area, please see '[Promoting children and young people's mental health and wellbeing: a whole school or college approach]' (Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, & Department for Education, 2023) for example.

Building whole school systems that promote emotional wellbeing

A whole-school ethos that supports and promotes emotional wellbeing and mental health; including awareness of and strategies to reduce barriers to attendance, requires many components. These include school culture and leadership, policies, frameworks and support systems, collaboration with external agencies and families, CYP-centred approaches, and internal roles and responsibilities, such as an EBSNA Champion.



Inclusive senior leadership team: A commitment from the senior leadership team to prioritise all CYP, whatever their unique combination of needs, to promote inclusive practice and create a sense of belonging.

School staff are valued and supported: Clear protocols regarding emotional support and stress management are evident within the school's policies and systems. This may include opportunities for supervision.

Continuous professional development (CPD): CPD is made available for all staff, with regular messages shared on the importance of wellbeing, emotional and physical health and an emphasis that it is the responsibility of the whole staff team. This will include regular updates and sharing of good practice relating specifically to EBSNA, mental health and facilitating safety.

CYP voice: Making time and space, and use of appropriate tools to capture CYP voice; ensuring all planning is led by CYP, wherever possible.

Partnerships with external agencies: Use external agency support at the targeted stage of the graduated approach to check ongoing support put in place by the school is appropriate. If needed at the specialist stage use this to support bespoke planning and intervention strategies.

Policies: Proactive and CYP-friendly school policies focused on safeguarding, bullying and supporting attendance are important. Consider: how will your CYP understand and take reassurance from the processes and systems in place?

Curriculum: Ensure the curriculum is appropriately differentiated and use adaptive teaching to remove barriers to attendance for identified CYP. Include direct teaching of emotional wellbeing and self-care for CYP.

Signposting for families and CYP: Signpost to an array of support agencies, for protecting the wellbeing of CYP and their families. Please see the ATTEND Framework Support Strategies guidance for key services to consider.

EBSNA Champion(s): Ensure that school appoint an EBSNA Champion (ideally at least two in a secondary setting). Ensure that the Champion(s) have protected time each week to lead on this support in school. Please see our Introduction to the EBSNA Champion role.

Early identification: Use the EBSNA baseline assessment tools to have proactive, supportive conversations with CYP and families, focused on exploring a CYP's circumstances with compassion and understanding.

Graduated approach (assess, plan, do, review): Follow Warwickshire's graduated approach of support, prioritising early intervention and preventative support and moving to targeted or specialist support where needed.

Strategies and interventions: Plan support strategies bespoke to the CYP's circumstances and led by the school's use of the EBSNA baseline assessment tools. Ensure that CYP's views are central to planning support. For possible support ideas, see EBSNA Matrix of Support and local Case Studies of support.

Please see our **Whole-School EBSNA Audit tool** to support your school's planning with these ideas.

Questions to consider may include:

- Which members of staff should we include in our whole-school EBSNA audit?
- What do we already do well, as a school, to support CYP who experience barriers to school attendance?
- What shorter-term goals could we focus on, over the next two terms?

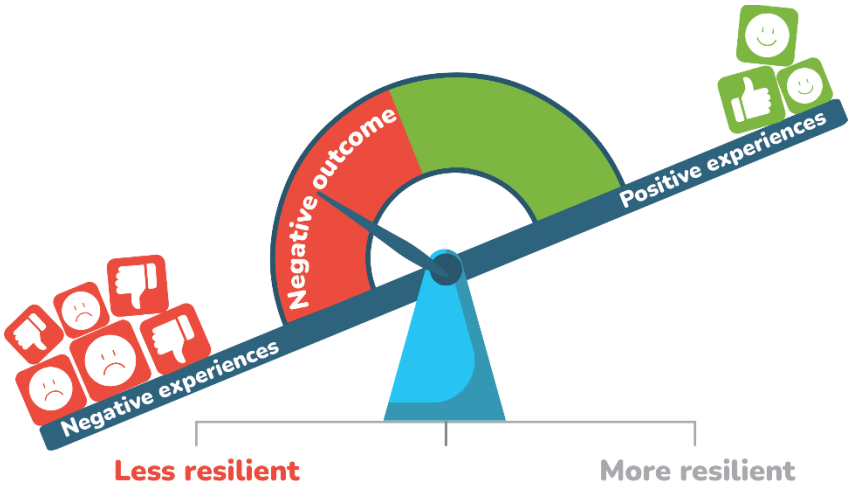
Key principles and best practice – an overview

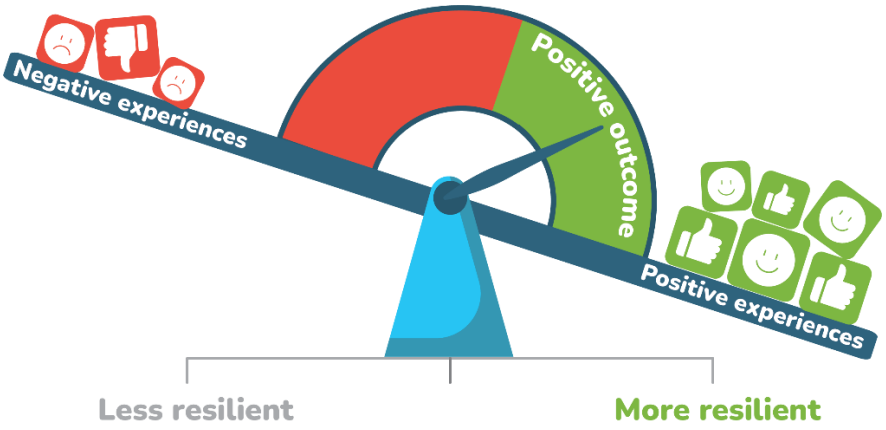
1. Recognise that a CYP's needs and circumstances are often complex

Barriers to school attendance often develop for a CYP because of a mix of different things – not just one cause. These can be linked to the CYP, their home life, their school experience, their skills/experience of dealing with challenging situations, and if the correct support is in place to support them to cope.

Some common **risk factors** may include moving from primary to secondary school; family loss or bereavement; struggles with the curriculum; social communication difficulties; changes in friendships; bullying, although this is not an exhaustive list.

If school becomes too stressful and the CYP doesn't have enough support or **protective factors**, their wellbeing (and attendance) will suffer. Our EBSNA baseline assessment materials help you to explore these risk and protective factors for each CYP.





2. Spot the barriers to attendance

It's important to understand why a CYP isn't coming to school. If we don't know what's wrong, we might give the wrong kind of help. Families and professionals need to work together to understand a CYP's concerns and reduce stress while increasing support.

3. Listening to the CYP

Every CYP is different. We need to talk to them and listen to how they feel. This helps us to understand what is making things hard and what might help. Our EBSNA baseline assessment tools can support your school with this.

4. All behaviour is communication

CYP show how they feel through their behaviour. This might look like anger, sadness, or shutting down. Adults need to look beyond the behaviour and ask, "What is this CYP trying to tell me?"

5. Act early

EBSNA often builds up slowly. The earlier we notice signs and offer help, the better. Capture observations and feedback from staff using the Round Robin tool, track attendance data and use our assessment tools to have gentle, curious conversations with families as early as possible.

6. Build good communication with families

Schools and families should stay in regular contact. Everyone should feel listened to. It helps to have a key adult at school who families can talk to.

7. Work together

Support works best when schools, families, and professionals all agree on what's needed. Families' views should be central to any plan of support. Use our assessment tools to agree on the support that may be needed.

8. Be flexible

Support should be tailored to each CYP's needs and circumstances. Government guidance supports this personalised approach. This could mean adjusting start-of-day routines; changing uniform rules; making sensory accommodations; offering quiet spaces; adapting lessons or break times; providing extra learning support or emotional support, for example. See our local case studies for examples of support.

9. Share information across school staff

If a CYP has agreed support or adjustments, it is important that all staff know about these. This helps the CYP to feel safe and supported.

10. Avoid blame

It is essential to avoid unhelpful attributions or assumptions surrounding families and non-attendance – that families lack proactivity, do not value education or are condoning non-attendance. Families are often making decisions intended to protect a CYP's wellbeing and best interests, sometimes on a daily basis. We need to trust families, trust their concerns, trust their insights, trust their perceived solutions. The Barriers to Education website explores some unhelpful beliefs surrounding CYP's attendance difficulties.

11. Supporting the wellbeing of the entire family

Explore broader systems of support available to families, for example Early Help, Targeted Support, SEND Support groups, to support the emotional and practical support needs of the wider family unit. For more information on this type of support, please see the Local Offer pages.

12. Plan for transitions

Key transition points have been noted as periods where school attendance can be affected, for example between 5-6 years and 11-13 years. Therefore, CYP who have associated risk factors for EBSNA within these educational stages should be closely monitored and additional transition support considered.

13. Whole-school support

Schools should create a culture of understanding and kindness around EBSNA. Positive relationships with teachers and peers help CYP to feel a sense of belonging. Schools should regularly review their systems and staff training. Tools like the Warwickshire Whole School EBSNA Audit can help.

14. Track absence properly

Schools should keep good records of why CYP are missing school. This helps spot patterns and understand what's going on. Good communication between school attendance officers, school senior leaders and staff working directly with families is essential. The Checklist for

Attendance Tracking and Support (CATS) also provides families with the opportunity to explore patterns to attendance difficulties.

15. Rethinking progress

Progress doesn't always mean full attendance. Create a school system which doesn't just focus on increasing attendance figures but focuses first and foremost on helping CYP to make gradual and sustainable steps of progress towards feeling safe, happy and emotionally secure within school. Please see our training video on this.

16. Celebrate personal progress

Focus on small, personal steps forward – progress is often more holistic, for example settling in with friends, reconnecting with learning, building trust with key adults, celebrating positive successes as they happen, and so on.

17. Avoid leading with a punitive approach

Using attendance-related sanctions or legal action for poor attendance can damage trust between schools and families. Instead, schools should start with understanding and support to build positive relationships. The latest government guidance advocates for this 'support first' approach. Use our EBSNA baseline assessment tools to build these connections.

18. Step-by-step support (Graduated Approach)

Schools should follow a clear process: *Assess – Plan – Do – Review*. This helps make sure support is tailored to each CYP's circumstances and reviewed regularly. The Warwickshire Graduated Approach for Supporting EBSNA gives guidance on how to do this.

19. Be honest and clear

Schools should be open about what support they can or cannot offer. We hear from families that this helps to build genuine trust.

20. Review support regularly

Work to timescales agreed between the CYP, their family and school. This may need to be weekly or fortnightly in some instances, to keep plans under close review. Our EBSNA Additional Support Plan can help you with this.

Supportive universal provision for all CYP - what are we expected to provide?

Universal support refers to proactive, whole-school strategies that promote emotional wellbeing and prevent barriers to school attendance for all CYP.

These approaches are embedded in everyday practice and include flexible teaching methods, emotionally safe classroom environments, predictable routines, and inclusive school cultures. Staff are encouraged to build trusting relationships, use psychologically informed approaches, and ensure consistent communication across the school. Practical resources such as calming tools, sensory supports, and visual timetables are made available, while school policies and ethos reflect a commitment to safety, belonging, and mental health for all CYP.

These universal strategies lay the foundation for early intervention and help all CYP feel safe, supported, and ready to learn. Please see the EBSNA Matrix of Support for universal provision ideas.

Supporting patterns of non-attendance – points to consider

Has your school:

- Established a shared understanding of the factors affecting a CYP's wellbeing (and school attendance), through meetings with the family and using the EBSNA assessment tools/resources? You can use our ATTEND framework meeting handout to introduce these meetings to parents/carers.
- Identified a named key adult who maintains daily communication with the CYP, including wellbeing check-ins and ensuring access to learning materials if they are not in class?
- Worked with the CYP directly to gather their views using tools and resources from the EBSNA toolkit?
- Made reasonable adjustments in response to the CYP's needs, led by their views/wishes?
- Created an EBSNA Additional Support Plan, with the CYP, school staff, and family that captures personalised support ideas?
- Put in place measures to maintain connection, belonging, and peer relationships (if the CYP is not currently attending school)?

How will we know that a whole school approach is working well?

- ✓ My school feels safe and welcoming to all CYP and families
- ✓ The voice of every CYP is heard and valued
- ✓ We recognise and support our most vulnerable CYP
- ✓ Parents and carers positively engage with my school
- ✓ CYP, staff and parents seek help when needed
- ✓ Staff in my school also feel healthy and happy

(credit to Pooky Knightsmith, 2023).

Your school can also reflect on whole school systems for promoting mental health and wellbeing for all (CYP and staff) by following the Mentally Healthy Schools approach (Anna Freud Centre) - a free website for all primary, secondary and FE settings across the UK. This includes an audit for developing and reviewing your whole-school approach.

For a case study of supportive whole-school practice, please see Gov.uk - Improving attendance: good practice for schools and multi-academy trusts

For a case study of a whole-school approach to promoting emotional wellbeing (and attendance), see information from Falinge Park High School, Rochdale.

Watch our training video on EBSNA whole-school and preventative approaches

Please note: For reviewing your whole school EBSNA support systems, please see Warwickshire's Whole School EBSNA Audit Tool