



The Association
for Child and Adolescent
Mental Health

Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) in Practice: Evidence, Complexity, and Recovery-Oriented Approaches

A Guide to Session Recaps and Further resources



What You'll Find in This Guide



Session recaps

Click on each speaker to view a recap
of the session's key takeaways



[Prof. Caroline Bond](#)



[Assoc. Prof. Kathryn Lester](#)



[Dr. Jerricah Holder](#)



Further reading

Selected resources for further exploration



Test your knowledge activity.

A set of questions and answers to test
what you've learned and reinforce key ideas



School attendance:

The research evidence and potential implications for CAMHS

What we've learned from Prof. Caroline Bond

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"School attendance isn't a simple or straightforward area, and there's lots of different factors that will influence young people's ability to access education... we can't rely on one agency to be solving them. We need a multi-agency response."

"One size doesn't fit all, so we need to be working with our communities, with our families... to come up with approaches that are tailored to what our families and communities need."

”

School attendance: No single cause, no single fix

School absence is a wicked problem: complex, hard to pin down, with no single cause and no single agency able to resolve it. It was a concern before COVID; the pandemic exacerbated existing trends rather than creating them, and these trends are expected to persist well into the 2030s.

5 features that make attendance a complex challenge

Multiple, cumulative risks

Difficulties rarely stem from one cause; children typically face several interacting risks at once.

Uneven impact

Absence is roughly twice as high among pupils eligible for free school meals, and higher among pupils with SEND and SEMH needs

Uncertain pathways

A given profile of risk does not reliably lead to one outcome — truancy, school refusal/avoidance, withdrawal or exclusion can all follow.

A punitive wider context

In England, fixed penalty notices and attendance contracts can distress families, particularly parents of children with additional needs.

A weakened social contract

Post-COVID, trust between parents and schools has weakened, with parents often feeling blamed rather than heard.



Together, these factors mean attendance cannot be addressed by schools alone — it needs proactive, collaborative responses that tackle multiple risks at once and draw on local data.

Matching the response to the level of need

The response is organised around tiered, ecological models — the bio-ecological KITES model and the multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) pyramid. The question moves from what the problem is to *how services should be organised*.

Three tiers structure the response

Tier 1 Universal

A culture of safety and belonging, inclusive and consistent policies (attendance and behaviour policies aligned, not in conflict), strong family relationships, a broadened curriculum, and preventative use of data.

For pupils beginning to struggle: partnership with families, mental health support, mentoring, family support and signposting, and a "support first" rather than punitive approach from specialist staff.

Tier 2 Targeted

Tier 3 Intensive

For severe, entrenched difficulties: individualised, multi-agency support; gradual return-to-school models (part-time timetables, telepresence) rather than flooding; and alternative provision where return is not currently possible.

Getting the language right

Alongside the tiered model, some practical issues shape day-to-day CAMHS work: how attendance difficulties are named, how they intersect with neurodivergence, and where the evidence is still thin



1 **Terminology is unsettled.** *There is no diagnostic category for school non-attendance, so terminology has proliferated, and the historical four-term framework — truancy, school refusal/avoidance, withdrawal, exclusion — has been criticised for lacking diagnostic utility.*

2 **Use locally meaningful language.** *Some parents and young people may not like the term “EBSA” and may prefer terms such as “school phobia” or “school refusal.” The practical aim is terminology that is shared and consistent within your own locality, rather than universal consistency.*

3 **School distress without a neurodivergent profile appears rare.** *The tiered pyramid may need adapting for neurodivergence, with autism- and ADHD-friendly provision as part of the universal offer.*

4 **The evidence base has gaps.** *Much of it is based on American studies; local, context-responsive evidence is needed. England collects detailed attendance data but does not track mental health needs alongside it in the same detail.*

Information Worth Sharing

- **School absence is best understood as a "wicked problem."** *It is complex and multi-causal, and cannot be resolved by any single agency — proactive, multi-agency responses are needed rather than school-level fixes alone.*
- **The pandemic exacerbated existing trends rather than creating them.** *Attendance was already a concern before COVID, and these trends are expected to persist well into the 2030s.*
- **The impact of absence is not evenly distributed.** *Absence rates are around twice as high for pupils eligible for free school meals, and higher for pupils with SEND and SEMH needs.*
- **A tiered model helps organise the response.** *Universal, targeted and intensive tiers allow services to act systematically — and the strongest case is for investing early.*
- **Punitive approaches sit uneasily with EBSA.** *Fixed penalty notices and attendance contracts can distress families and may worsen the situation, particularly for children with additional needs.*
- **Terminology should be locally meaningful, not just technically precise.** *There is no diagnostic term for school non-attendance; what matters most is language that is shared, blame-free and locally consistent.*



After the perfect storm:

What Research Tells Us About Supporting Families Affected by EBSA

What we've learned from Assoc. Prof. Kathryn Lester

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“EBSA is not just a child presenting problem. It can be a whole family experience”

“You can't really expect that, in moments of high stress or dysregulation, a parent will have the energy to implement behaviour-change strategies that may be needed to support a return to school. Often, families may need additional support before they have the capacity to sustain those changes.”

”

Three things commonly show up in the family

Practical strain

Daily routines, parents' work and household finances can be disrupted.

Emotional and psychological load

Parents frequently report guilt and stress, and family-level factors such as low parental self-efficacy are associated with absenteeism.

Avoidance-maintaining behaviour

Overprotective parenting and accommodations can inadvertently sustain avoidance over time.

How families get stuck: the accommodation cycle

Families can become "stuck" through the anxiety-and-accommodation maintenance cycle, which runs in **five steps**.

1. **A child experiences distress about school.** Anxiety is a natural threat response; for some children it begins to impair daily life.
2. **The parent accommodates.** This may be participation in symptom-related behaviours (repeated reassurance, speaking to school for the child, daily negotiation) or modifications to family routines (allowing late sleeping, reducing work hours, making home more rewarding).
3. **Both feel short-term relief.** The accommodation reduces the child's immediate distress — exactly what the parent intends.
4. **The relief reinforces the pattern.** The child learns distress is a signal to avoid rather than tolerate; the parent learns accommodating works in the moment.
5. **Avoidance and anxiety are maintained.** The child misses opportunities to learn they can tolerate discomfort, that feared outcomes may not materialise, and that they have more coping resources than they think.



It's not about telling parents that they're doing it wrong, but to help them understand the maintenance cycle and to develop alternative responses to their child's distress

A different kind of support: the ISAAC intervention

ISAAC (**I**ntervention for **S**chool Anxiety and **A**bsenteeism in **C**hildren) is a co-designed, community-based parent intervention for primary-school children affected by EBSA, shaped by qualitative work with parents and professionals.

Why current support falls short

Specialist support often arrives too late: CBT is typically offered only once attendance has already fallen below 90%, behind long waiting lists and a referral process.

What ISAAC does differently

It is designed to reach families early, without strict absence criteria; sits outside professional-led settings; is brief and focal; treats family factors as the central target; and pairs self-guided content with regular human support from a trained non-specialist.

ISAAC Intervention Structure

Module 1

Parental stress and wellbeing

Module 2

Positive parenting strategies and accommodations

Module 3

Relationships and communication with school

The evidence

A small, uncontrolled pilot (12 parents) showed encouraging feasibility and acceptability, with early signals on home-school communication, accommodating behaviours and school avoidance — but no effect on absences. These are "signals, not conclusions"; ISAAC is not yet publicly available, and trials are being sought.

Information Worth Sharing

- **EBSA is a whole-family experience, not just a child presenting problem.** *When a child is affected, parents commonly carry stress, anxiety and guilt, and family routines, work and finances can all be disrupted — so support may need to consider the family, not the child alone.*
- **The children of concern are not always the ones missing school.** *Some children attend fairly regularly while experiencing significant distress, and are missed entirely by absence statistics.*
- **Parental wellbeing is part of supporting the child, not a detour from it.** *Parents affected by EBSA often face mental health difficulties of their own, and a parent under significant strain may have limited capacity to sustain change at home.*
- **Parental "accommodations" are common and understandable, but can have unintended effects.** *Reassuring, negotiating or allowing a child to stay home eases distress in the moment but may reinforce avoidance over time — so the aim is to help parents recognise the cycle, not to suggest they are doing it wrong.*
- **Home-school communication often breaks down through mutual misreading.** *Parents who feel blamed tend to withdraw, and schools can read that withdrawal as a lack of commitment, which is why communication may work better when it starts from a shared understanding of EBSA as anxiety-driven, rather than a parenting failure or a child's choice.*
- **Promising support is early, accessible and family-focused.** *Reviews suggest the most promising attendance interventions focus on parental engagement and communication; ISAAC is one early-stage example, though its pilot results are preliminary signals rather than firm conclusions.*



When Disconnection Becomes Deeply Rooted:

Using Moving From Recovery to Rediscovery Model to rebuild trust and hope for children no longer attending school.

What we've learned from Dr. Jerricah Holder

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"Recovery is not a passive process. It involves thoughtful, intentional support from the adults around the child, helping the child remain gently connected to people, places, and routines as their capacity slowly returns."

"Continuous attendance conversations can inadvertently trap children in their current emotional states because recovery becomes synonymous with going back to school."

”

When early intervention is no longer enough

Some children sit at the far end of the continuum: **chronic, entrenched non-attendance**, often out of school for months or years, for whom Tier 1 and Tier 2 interventions have not worked or are no longer sufficient. For these children, early anxiety-based models are no longer enough; **what is needed is a recovery-oriented model that deliberately prioritises rest, respite and felt safety before any re-engagement.**

What characterises the children this model is for:

They are in school burnout.

A state of complete exhaustion and depletion of internal resources, arising from prolonged stress without adequate rest, respite or recovery — saturating a child's experience biologically and psychologically.

They have often left school as a last resort.

Families tend to withdraw children out of desperation rather than genuine choice; distress does not resolve once a child leaves school, and a school can remain a valuable source of support even for a child who is not attending.

What the model is built on:

- 1. The evidence base is still emerging.** Understanding of burnout in children and school is at a very early stage; there is no direct evidence base for recovery models specifically.
- 2. It draws on research and lived experience.** The model dovetails the research literature with what families, "led by intuition and care," already find helpful, and with what psychologists report working in practice.

This is a Tier 3 intervention, designed for children whose needs are extensive and deeply entrenched.

Five principles: from rest to re-engagement

The "Moving from Recovery to Rediscovery" model sets out five guiding principles (not linear steps) introduced according to the child's capacity, preferences and pace.

1. Respite and recovery

A safe space to recover from burnout and reconnect with self and family.

2. Reducing the pressure

Lowering demands to support wellbeing and resilience, sometimes through flexible educational approaches.

3. Reconnecting through safe relationships

Rebuilding connection with trusted adults and peers, without pressure to return to school.

4. Rediscovering curiosity

Using the child's strengths and interests to rebuild motivation and confidence as a learner.

5. Re-engaging the world

Gradually supporting participation in community and educational settings.



Some children return to familiar routines, while others build a new path forward — and both can reflect meaningful progress. Success is measured by wellbeing, connection, and engagement, not by returning to life exactly as it was before.

Putting the principles into practice

1. Respite and recovery

Validate the child's experience and prioritise rest, sleep, and emotional safety. Reduce pressure around attendance while rebuilding connection and stability at home.

2. Reducing the pressure

Lower demands and adapt expectations to the child's energy and tolerance levels. Use predictable routines, flexible approaches, and reduce unnecessary masking demands.

3. Reconnecting through safe relationships

Identify trusted adults and rebuild connection through brief, regular contact. Keep relationships pressure-free and focused on safety, not returning to school.

4. Rediscovering curiosity

Use the child's interests and strengths to gradually rebuild motivation and confidence. Focus on meaningful engagement and small experiences of success before academic demands.

5. Re-engaging the world

Take small, supported steps back into community, learning, or daily activities. Explore flexible educational pathways and define success through wellbeing and engagement.

Information Worth Sharing

- **Some children reach a point of "school burnout" that early intervention models were not built for.** *Burnout is described as exhaustion and depletion of internal resources from prolonged stress without adequate rest — and for these children, Tier 1 and Tier 2 approaches may no longer be enough.*
- **Recovery starts with rest and felt safety, not with a return plan.** *Recovery-oriented models deliberately prioritise respite before re-engagement — an intentional contrast with rapid or enforced return-to-school approaches, which research increasingly suggests can be counterproductive for entrenched non-attendance.*
- **Recovery is an active process, not passive waiting.** *It depends on thoughtful, intentional support from the adults around the child, keeping them gently connected to people, places and routines as capacity slowly returns.*
- **Constant conversations about returning to school can hold a child back.** *When any sign of improvement triggers renewed pressure to return, recovery can stall — so pausing attendance-focused conversations may be considered a deliberate, time-limited therapeutic decision rather than giving up on school.*
- **Trying to "make home boring" can be the wrong instinct.** *Comforts and special interests are worth protecting, not withholding — they support a child's mental health and can later become the hooks that draw them back towards learning and connection.*
- **Success need not mean life looking exactly as it did before.** *For some children recovery means returning to their previous world, for others a new version of it — what matters is that the child is well and engaged, in whatever form that takes.*

Recommended Reading and Resources

These are some of the resources mentioned during the event. Each image links to externally produced material on school attendance and EBSA, for use by professionals, schools and families.

EBSA GUIDANCE

Emotionally based school avoidance guidance and toolkit for professionals and families.



S Q U A R E P E G

Square Peg

Working together to better understand absence from school & find effective solutions to attendance barriers

[Square Peg](#)

Define Fine | Support for School Attendance Difficulties

Define Fine work with parents and professionals to find solutions to school attendance difficulties or barriers to education relating to SEND and physical or mental health, sometimes referred to as EBSA.

[definefine.org.uk /](http://definefine.org.uk/)

Recommended Reading and Resources

Explore some recent articles and blogs on the topic!

- [*Meet the Experts: Professor Caroline Bond and Jerricah Holder on Emotionally Based School Avoidance \(EBSA\)*](#)
- [*Key features of parent supported approaches and interventions for children and young people experiencing anxiety and school attendance difficulties: a systematic review*](#)
- [*Perfect storm: emotionally based school avoidance in the post-COVID-19 pandemic context*](#)
- [*Intervention for School Anxiety and Absenteeism in Children \(ISAAC\): Mixed-Method Feasibility Study of a Coach-Assisted, Parent-Focused Online Program*](#)
- [*Practitioner Review: School refusal: developments in conceptualisation and treatment since 2000*](#)
- [*Review: The association between anxiety and poor attendance at school – a systematic review*](#)



Test your knowledge!

1

T or F? "School attendance started to be a concern after the COVID-19 pandemic"

2

Which children are "missed" from absence statistics, and why do they matter?

3

Why were parents chosen as ISAAC's primary intervention target?

4

T or F? "Rapid or forced return-to-school approaches are the most effective way to re-engage struggling pupils."

5

Why are socio-ecological models considered useful for understanding EBSA?

6

T or F? "Family factors associated with EBSA were presented as established causes of absence."

[Check the answers](#) →



Check your answers!

1

False. Attendance was already a concern pre-COVID; the pandemic exacerbated existing trends rather than creating them.

2

Children who attend regularly but with significant distress. They are invisible in the data, yet part of the same continuum of need.

3

Parents act as connective tissue between child and school, and parental engagement is among the most promising targets.

4

False. Punitive measures can be counterproductive; gradual, paced approaches tend to work better.

5

Because they resist locating the problem solely in the child, family or school, framing it as a complex interplay across systems.

6

False. Family factors (e.g. parental mental health, accommodations, family stress) are associated with EBSA and absenteeism, but the direction of effect remains unclear.



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CPD events and training
opportunities at
<https://www.acamh.org/events/>