

EBSA & Anxiety-Informed Attendance Practice

Supporting pupils back into school — not away from it

COMPASSION WITH BOUNDARIES

SUPPORT WITH AMBITION



Why This Module Matters

Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) represents one of the most significant and growing challenges facing schools today. The complexity of anxiety-related absence requires a sophisticated, nuanced response that balances genuine compassion with clear expectations. This module equips you with the knowledge, strategies, and confidence to support pupils experiencing EBSA whilst maintaining appropriate boundaries and ambition for their educational engagement.

Increasing Prevalence

EBSA cases have risen significantly in recent years, particularly following the pandemic. More pupils are presenting with anxiety-related barriers to attendance, requiring schools to develop expertise in this area as a matter of urgency.

Complex Presentations

EBSA rarely presents in straightforward ways. It intersects with SEND, mental health, family dynamics, and social factors — requiring collaborative, informed responses rather than simple solutions.

Emotionally Demanding

Supporting pupils with EBSA can be emotionally exhausting for staff and families alike. The distress is real, the stakes are high, and the path forward isn't always clear — making this work both challenging and deeply meaningful.

The central tension: Anxiety explains absence — it does not excuse long-term disengagement. Handled well, attendance improves. Handled poorly, absence becomes entrenched and increasingly difficult to reverse.

What EBSA Is (and Isn't)

Clarity of definition shapes the quality of response. Understanding what EBSA truly represents — and what it doesn't — prevents unhelpful narratives and ensures appropriate interventions. Labels matter because they influence how we think, how we respond, and ultimately, whether we help or hinder a child's return to school.

EBSA Is:

- **Anxiety-driven difficulty** attending school — not wilful refusal
- **Often linked to fear, overwhelm, or distress** — genuine emotional responses to perceived threat
- **A communication of unmet need** — the behaviour is telling us something important about the child's experience
- **A signal that something requires attention** — whether that's curriculum access, social relationships, sensory environment, or unidentified SEND

EBSA typically involves genuine physical symptoms (stomach aches, headaches, nausea) caused by anxiety. The child isn't "making it up" — their body is responding to psychological distress.

EBSA Is Not:

- **Truancy** — truancy involves concealment and often enjoyable alternative activities; EBSA involves visible distress and no pleasure in absence
- **Bad behaviour** — this isn't defiance or disobedience; it's a child overwhelmed by anxiety
- **Parenting failure** — parents of children with EBSA are often exhausted, doing their best in impossible circumstances
- **A reason to abandon attendance expectations** — understanding EBSA means supporting attendance, not removing it as a goal

Misidentifying EBSA leads to inappropriate responses. Treating it as truancy increases shame and anxiety. Treating it as an excuse to abandon school entirely increases avoidance and long-term harm.

📌 **Remember:** The language we use shapes our response. "School refuser" implies wilfulness. "Pupil experiencing EBSA" centres the anxiety and positions us as supporters rather than enforcers.

Common EBSA Triggers

EBSA rarely emerges from a single, identifiable cause. More commonly, it develops from a constellation of factors that intersect and compound over time. Understanding common triggers helps us identify early warning signs, tailor our responses appropriately, and address root causes rather than simply managing symptoms. The key insight is that EBSA is fundamentally about school being perceived as unsafe — whether physically, emotionally, or psychologically — rather than about unwillingness or defiance.

	Transitions & Change New academic years, different teachers, timetable changes, or building moves can destabilise pupils who rely heavily on predictability and routine. Even positive changes can trigger anxiety if they disrupt established patterns of safety.
	Social Anxiety Peer relationships, social navigation, fear of judgement, friendship difficulties, or experiences of bullying (even low-level) can make school feel emotionally dangerous. For some pupils, the social demands are more overwhelming than academic ones.
	Academic Pressure Fear of failure, perfectionism, feeling unable to meet expectations, or previous experiences of academic struggle can create powerful avoidance. This is particularly common among able pupils with hidden SEND or those who have "masked" difficulties successfully until demands increase.
	Sensory Overload Noise, lighting, crowded corridors, unpredictable bells, or overwhelming sensory environments can be intolerable for neurodivergent pupils. What appears manageable to staff may feel genuinely unbearable to a child with sensory processing differences.
	Trauma or Negative Experience Previous difficult experiences — whether a single incident or accumulated negative associations — can create powerful fear responses. The brain's threat-detection system becomes hypersensitive to school-related cues.
	SEND or Unmet Needs Unidentified or unsupported special educational needs frequently underpin EBSA. When curriculum access is difficult and no adjustments are in place, school becomes a daily experience of failure and frustration.

Critical understanding: EBSA is about school being perceived as unsafe — not about unwillingness to attend. Our role is to understand what's making school feel threatening and systematically address those barriers whilst maintaining the expectation of attendance.

The Danger of Getting EBSA Wrong

Well-intentioned responses to EBSA can inadvertently entrench the very patterns we're trying to break. When we respond to anxiety by removing the anxiety-provoking situation entirely, we provide short-term relief but create long-term harm. Understanding these risks is essential for maintaining appropriate boundaries whilst remaining compassionate. The evidence is clear: avoidance reduces anxiety temporarily but significantly increases it over time, creating a cycle that becomes progressively harder to interrupt.



Normalising Long-Term Absence

When absence extends beyond a few weeks without clear plans for return, it becomes the new normal. The longer a pupil is away, the harder re-entry becomes — both practically and psychologically.



Reducing Expectations Indefinitely

Temporary adjustments become permanent accommodations. Reduced timetables stretch from weeks to months. "Just getting them in" replaces meaningful educational engagement. Low expectations become self-fulfilling.



Home as Default Safe Space

When home becomes the consistent alternative to school, it cements avoidance patterns. The child's world contracts, opportunities narrow, and the prospect of attending anywhere becomes increasingly unthinkable.



Loss of Routine & Confidence

Extended absence erodes daily structure, social connections, and sense of capability. Confidence diminishes. Skills atrophy. The gap between the pupil's current reality and school expectations widens, making return feel impossible.



Escalating Anxiety Over Time

Paradoxically, the longer a pupil avoids school, the more anxiety intensifies. Each day away confirms the message: "School is too dangerous for you." The fear grows rather than diminishes.

📌 **The fundamental principle:** Avoidance reduces anxiety in the short term and increases it in the long term. Our compassion must be expressed through supported exposure, not through removal of expectations. Recovery happens through gradual, supported return — not through extended absence.

Anxiety-Informed, Not Anxiety-Led

This distinction is fundamental to effective EBSA practice and represents the core philosophy of this module. It's the difference between responses that genuinely help and those that, despite good intentions, entrench difficulties. Both approaches demonstrate care — but only one maintains appropriate ambition for the child's future.



Anxiety-Informed Practice

We understand that anxiety is real, valid, and often overwhelming. We recognise its impact on the body and mind. We respond with empathy and appropriate adjustments. We adapt our approach based on individual need. **But we maintain the expectation of attendance.**

Anxiety-informed practice says: "I understand this is hard. I believe you when you say you're struggling. And I'm going to help you manage this anxiety whilst you attend school — because school attendance is part of your recovery, not the reward for recovering first."

Anxiety-Led Practice

Anxiety becomes the decision-maker. When the child feels anxious, they stay home. Attendance becomes conditional on the absence of anxiety. Decisions are driven by short-term comfort rather than long-term wellbeing. **Anxiety dictates whether school happens at all.**

Anxiety-led practice says: "If you're anxious, you don't have to attend. We'll wait until you feel better." This sounds compassionate but teaches that anxiety is unmanageable, that avoidance is the solution, and that the child is too fragile to cope with challenge.

Our aim is supported attendance, not comfort at any cost. We're not trying to eliminate anxiety before return — we're building the child's capacity to manage anxiety whilst attending. This is genuinely therapeutic, genuinely compassionate, and genuinely in the child's best interests.

Early Warning Signs

EBSA rarely appears overnight. It typically develops gradually, with early indicators that are easy to miss or dismiss if we're not watching carefully. Recognising these warning signs enables early intervention — which is significantly more effective than responding once patterns are deeply entrenched. The pupils who eventually become long-term absent almost always showed these early signals first. Our attentiveness in these early stages can prevent weeks or months of difficulty later.



Frequent Lateness

Persistent difficulty arriving on time, particularly when previously punctual. Morning routines become battles. Lateness increases gradually over weeks.



Partial Attendance

Arriving late and leaving early. Missing particular lessons. Increasing time in medical room or pastoral areas rather than lessons. Fragmented, inconsistent presence.



Increased Medical Room Visits

More frequent requests to leave lessons, visits to medical room or pastoral staff, seeking "safe adults" repeatedly throughout the day.



"Feeling Sick" Patterns

Regular complaints of stomach aches, headaches, or nausea — particularly on school mornings, improving rapidly at weekends, or linked to specific lessons or days.



Withdrawal in Class

Reduced participation, reluctance to engage, appearing distressed or tearful, seeking reassurance frequently, or expressing worry about school when previously confident.



Rising Parent Anxiety

Parents expressing increasing worry, reporting difficulty getting their child to school, describing morning distress, or requesting meetings about their child's wellbeing with growing frequency.

📌 **Early action prevents entrenchment.** Once EBSA patterns are established, they become significantly harder to address. A light-touch conversation in Week 2 can prevent a crisis in Week 12. Notice, name, and respond early — before absence becomes the pattern.

The Graduated Response

Effective EBSA support requires a graduated, proportionate approach that matches the level of intervention to the severity and persistence of difficulty. One of the most common mistakes is either under-responding (hoping it will resolve itself) or over-responding (immediately implementing intensive support for early-stage concerns). A graduated response ensures we provide the right level of support at the right time, escalating appropriately when initial approaches aren't working. This prevents both drift and overwhelm.



Step 1: Notice Patterns Early

Attendance monitoring identifies emerging patterns. Pastoral conversations happen. We gather information and observe carefully. This is about early awareness, not yet formal intervention.



Step 2: Light-Touch Support

Informal adjustments, check-ins with a trusted adult, brief parent conversation. Changes are minor and temporary (e.g., meeting the pupil at the gate for a week, allowing a quiet start). Review after 2 weeks.



Step 3: Structured Attendance Plan

Formal plan with clear attendance targets, agreed adjustments, named support, and review date. This is documented, shared with all relevant staff, and time-limited (typically 4 weeks).



Step 4: Multi-Disciplinary Involvement

If attendance continues to deteriorate despite the plan, widen involvement: SENCO, educational psychologist, school nurse, mental health services. Consider whether EHCP assessment is needed. Escalate safeguarding if appropriate.



Step 5: Escalation & Statutory Routes

If attendance remains critically low despite intensive support, formal attendance proceedings may become necessary. This isn't failure — it's appropriate escalation when safeguarding concerns are significant and voluntary approaches haven't worked.

Critical principle: Skipping steps causes confusion and inconsistency. Starting at Step 4 for a pupil who needs Step 2 is overwhelming and stigmatising. Staying at Step 2 when Step 4 is clearly needed is neglectful. Match intervention to need, and escalate when progress stalls.

The 4-Week EBSA Support Plan

When informal approaches haven't improved attendance, a structured time-limited plan becomes essential. The 4-week timeframe is deliberate: it's long enough to see meaningful change but short enough to prevent drift. Plans that run indefinitely without review become holding patterns rather than pathways to improvement. This structure ensures accountability, clarity, and momentum whilst maintaining compassion and appropriate support.

Clear Attendance Goal

Specify exactly what "success" looks like. This might be full-time attendance, or it might be a realistic stepping stone (e.g., "attending 3 full days per week by Week 4"). Goals must be specific, measurable, and ambitious but achievable. Avoid vague goals like "improved attendance" — be precise about what improvement means.

Small, Achievable Steps

Break the attendance goal into weekly increments. Week 1 might focus on arriving by 9:30am. Week 2 on staying until lunchtime. Week 3 on attending full days. Small steps build confidence and create momentum. Celebrate progress whilst maintaining forward movement towards the ultimate goal.

Agreed Adjustments

Specify exactly what support will be in place. Who will the pupil check in with? Where will they go if overwhelmed? What specific adjustments to routine, environment, or curriculum are agreed? Be precise and time-limited. These adjustments support attendance — they don't replace it.

Named Adult Support

Identify one key adult as the main point of contact and plan coordinator. This person monitors progress, troubleshoots difficulties, communicates with parents, and ensures consistency. They're not solely responsible for all support, but they hold the plan together.

Review Date (Non-Negotiable)

Schedule the review meeting before the plan begins. This is not optional or "when we get around to it" — it's a firm commitment. At 4 weeks, evaluate progress. Has attendance improved sufficiently? Do adjustments need refining? Is escalation required? The review drives accountability and prevents plans drifting indefinitely.

 **Remember:** Attendance plans should always be a bridge back to full engagement — not a holding pattern that normalises partial attendance indefinitely. If a plan runs beyond 6–8 weeks without significant improvement, something isn't working. Either the plan needs substantial revision or escalation is required.

Reasonable Adjustments That Help Attendance

Not all adjustments are equally effective. The key distinction is whether an adjustment supports presence in school or replaces it. Truly helpful adjustments reduce barriers to attendance whilst maintaining educational engagement. They make school more accessible without lowering expectations. Unhelpful adjustments, despite being well-intentioned, can inadvertently send the message that school is optional or that long-term absence is acceptable.

Helpful Adjustments

These adjustments facilitate attendance and should be time-limited with regular review:

- **Predictable routines:** Consistent daily structure, advanced notice of changes, visual timetables, clear expectations about what each day will involve
- **Meet-and-greet:** Designated adult meeting pupil at arrival, providing brief check-in, easing the transition from home to school environment
- **Quiet start:** Arriving slightly early to settle before corridors become busy, starting day in a calm space before moving to lessons
- **Clear check-in/check-out:** Structured touchpoints with a trusted adult — brief morning check-in, possible midday contact, end-of-day review
- **Reduced transitions (temporarily):** Teaching some lessons in one room rather than moving buildings, reducing corridor navigation in the early stages of return
- **Sensory accommodations:** Movement breaks, ear defenders, alternative lunch location, adjusted seating position

All of these maintain school presence and educational engagement whilst reducing specific barriers.

Unhelpful Adjustments

These adjustments may feel compassionate but typically entrench difficulties:

- **Indefinite reduced timetables:** "Just mornings for now" that extends for months without clear plan for increase creates a new, lower baseline
- **Open-ended home learning:** Work sent home becomes the default rather than a temporary bridge, removing motivation to return
- **Removing school entirely:** Extended periods of no attendance whilst "waiting for the child to feel ready" rarely leads to readiness — absence makes return progressively harder
- **Removing all challenge:** Creating such minimal demands that school becomes unrecognisable won't build capacity to manage the real school environment
- **Parent remaining in school all day:** While a brief transition support, prolonged parent presence prevents development of independent coping strategies

These approaches prioritise short-term comfort over long-term wellbeing and capacity-building.

Guiding principle: Support must increase presence, not replace it. Adjustments should be building blocks towards fuller attendance, reviewed regularly, and gradually reduced as the pupil's confidence and capacity grow. The goal is always mainstream inclusion with appropriate support — not parallel provision that becomes permanent.

Working with Parents in EBSA Cases

Parents of children experiencing EBSA are often exhausted, frightened, and caught between their child's visible distress and external pressure to "just get them to school." They may have tried everything they can think of. They're frequently blamed by family members, judged by other parents, and feel profoundly alone. Our partnership with them is crucial — but it must be a partnership built on shared goals, clear expectations, and mutual accountability rather than avoidance-enabling sympathy.

Understanding Parent Experience

"I see my child in genuine distress every morning. Their fear is real. They're crying, they're physically sick, they're begging me not to make them go. How can I force them when they're this upset? What if I damage them? What if I make it worse?"

This is the daily reality for parents. Their child's distress is not manufactured — it's visceral and overwhelming. Parents need us to acknowledge this genuinely before they can hear anything else we have to say.

The Messages Parents Need to Hear

1. Anxiety is real and valid. We're not dismissing your child's distress or suggesting they're "making it up." Their fear is genuine, even if the threat isn't objectively dangerous.

2. Avoidance increases anxiety. The temporary relief of staying home makes the anxiety worse over time. Each day away makes return harder, not easier.

3. School attendance is part of recovery. We're not waiting for your child to recover before they return — attending school, with support, is how they'll recover. Attendance is the treatment, not the reward.

4. We will support — and we will review. You're not alone in this. We'll put support in place, we'll monitor closely, and we'll adjust if needed. But we're working towards attendance, not away from it.

❏ **Core phrase to share:** "Support is about helping children attend — not removing school from the equation. We understand this is incredibly difficult. We believe you when you describe your child's distress. And we're committed to supporting your child to manage that anxiety whilst attending school, because that's ultimately what will help them most."

Some parents will struggle with this message. They may resist, argue, or seek medical evidence that their child "can't" attend. Hold the boundary with compassion. Avoiding difficult conversations in the short term creates much more difficult conversations later when absence has become deeply entrenched.

SEND and EBSA

There's a significant overlap between EBSA and special educational needs. Pupils with autism, ADHD, sensory processing differences, language difficulties, or social communication needs are statistically much more likely to experience EBSA. This doesn't mean SEND causes school avoidance — but it does mean that without appropriate understanding and support, school can become genuinely overwhelming for these pupils. Getting this balance right is essential: we need meaningful adjustments that address real barriers whilst maintaining appropriately high expectations for attendance.



Why SEND Increases EBSA Risk

Autistic pupils may find social demands, sensory environments, and unpredictability overwhelming. ADHD pupils may struggle with executive function demands, long periods of stillness, or managing multiple transitions. Language difficulties make it harder to communicate distress before it becomes overwhelming. Many SEND pupils have spent years masking difficulties, using enormous energy to appear to cope, until they can't sustain it any longer.



Adjustments Must Be Meaningful

Generic, tokenistic adjustments don't help. "Give them movement breaks" means nothing if breaks aren't properly structured. "Reduce sensory overload" is meaningless without specific environmental changes. Adjustments must address the actual barriers this individual pupil faces. They should be developed with SENCO expertise, informed by assessment, and implemented consistently by all staff.



Expectations Must Remain High

SEND is not a reason to accept long-term absence. Yes, these pupils need different support. Yes, their path to consistent attendance may look different. But the destination is the same: full educational engagement. We adjust how we support them to get there — we don't abandon the ambition of getting there at all. Low expectations are discriminatory, not compassionate.



EHCP ≠ Exemption from Attendance

Having an Education, Health and Care Plan does not exempt a pupil from attendance expectations. EHCPs describe what support is needed — they don't authorise absence. If a pupil with an EHCP has significant attendance difficulties, we review whether provision is right, whether the plan needs amending, and whether placement is appropriate. We don't simply accept non-attendance as an inevitable consequence of SEND.

The principle: SEND pupils deserve the same ambition for attendance — with different, individualised support tailored to their specific needs. Anything less isn't meeting need — it's abandoning ambition. And that's both educationally and morally wrong.

When EBSA Becomes Safeguarding

EBSA always sits within safeguarding territory — a child missing substantial education is a child experiencing harm. But there are specific points at which EBSA moves from "significant concern requiring support" to "immediate safeguarding priority requiring escalation." Recognising these thresholds and acting decisively is essential. Delaying safeguarding responses because we're "still trying to engage the family" or "don't want to damage relationships" ultimately increases risk to the child.

Attendance Continues to Fall Despite Support

If a structured support plan is in place, consistently implemented, and attendance is deteriorating rather than improving, this indicates the current approach isn't working. The child is spending increasing amounts of time out of education. This is harm, and it requires urgent escalation — potentially including Children's Social Care referral.

Child Becomes Increasingly Isolated

When a pupil's world contracts to home only, when peer relationships disappear, when they're no longer accessing any educational or social opportunities, this is significant harm to development and wellbeing. Isolation increases mental health risks and makes eventual return exponentially harder.

Parent Anxiety Escalates or Becomes Enabling

Sometimes parental anxiety or mental health difficulties make it impossible for them to support their child's return to school. If parents are actively preventing attendance (even from a place of love and fear), or if their own anxiety is disabling their parenting, this may require safeguarding intervention to support both parent and child.

No Progress Despite Multiagency Support

If CAMHS, educational psychology, school nursing, and intensive pastoral support are all in place and attendance remains critically low, something systemic isn't working. This may require formal safeguarding review to consider whether current arrangements are adequate or whether alternative provision is needed.

Risk Increases — Self-Harm, Deteriorating Mental Health

If the pupil's mental health is deteriorating significantly, if self-harm is emerging or escalating, if there are references to suicidal ideation, immediate safeguarding action is required. This is urgent. Don't wait for the next review meeting — act immediately.

 **Critical message:** EBSA does not remove or reduce safeguarding duties. The fact that a child has anxiety does not mean we accept their absence from education indefinitely. Extended absence is harm. When our supportive, voluntary approaches aren't working, more formal safeguarding routes become necessary and appropriate. This isn't giving up — it's escalating appropriately to protect the child.

Staff Roles & Boundaries

EBSA work is emotionally demanding, and without clear boundaries, it can become overwhelming and unsustainable for staff. Part of effective EBSA practice is being clear about what is and isn't within our professional role. This protects both staff wellbeing and the quality of support provided to pupils. Maintaining boundaries isn't coldness — it's professional competence that ensures we can sustain effective support over time.

Staff Are Not Expected To:

- **Act as therapists.** We're educators, not mental health clinicians. We can be supportive, empathetic, and informed — but therapeutic treatment is outside our role and expertise. Refer appropriately to CAMHS or other services.
- **Absorb family distress.** Parents may need to express their worry and frustration. We can listen with compassion — but we're not responsible for managing parental anxiety or becoming their primary emotional support. Signpost to appropriate services if parents need that level of support.
- **Manage EBSA alone.** This is always team work. If you're trying to solve complex EBSA cases single-handedly, you're operating outside safe professional boundaries. Involve colleagues, escalate to senior leaders, and ensure supervision and support for yourself.
- **Succeed in every case.** Sometimes, despite skilled, persistent, compassionate intervention, attendance doesn't improve. This isn't personal failure. Some situations require resources, expertise, or interventions beyond what schools can provide. Knowing when to escalate is professional judgement, not defeat.

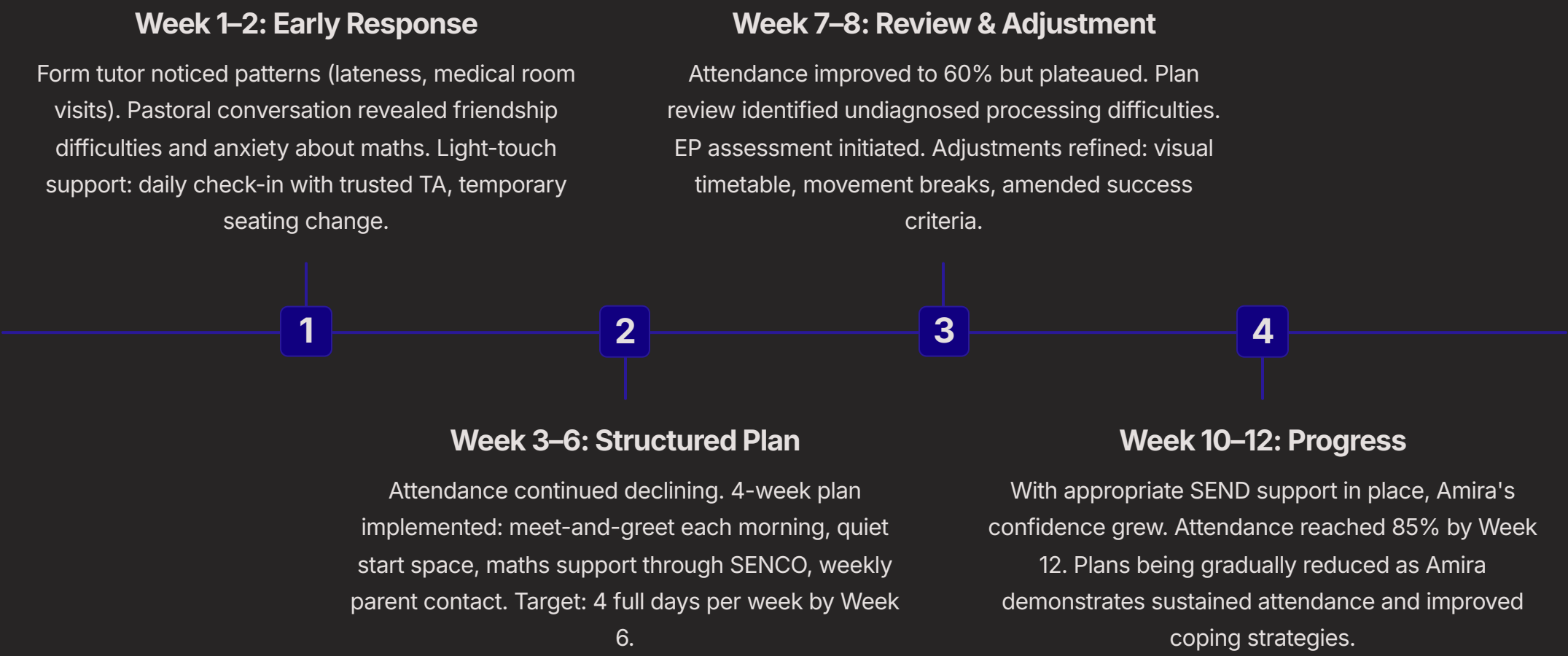
Staff Are Expected To:

- **Notice patterns early.** Attendance monitoring, observation, and early identification are core professional responsibilities. Spotting warning signs is within everyone's role.
- **Apply agreed strategies consistently.** If a support plan is in place, follow it. Consistency across all staff is essential. Don't undermine agreed approaches with well-meaning but contradictory responses.
- **Record and review.** Document concerns, interventions, and outcomes. EBSA cases require clear records of what's been tried, what's worked, and what hasn't. Good recording supports effective review and escalation.
- **Escalate appropriately.** Know your thresholds. When should pastoral staff involve SENCO? When does SENCO involve senior leaders? When do senior leaders involve external agencies? Understand your role in the graduated response and escalate when needed.
- **Communicate professionally with families.** Maintain compassionate but clear communication. Don't make promises you can't keep. Don't collude with avoidance. Set boundaries and expectations kindly but firmly.

Remember: Boundaries protect both staff and pupils. Clear roles mean pupils get the right support from the right people. It means staff can sustain this difficult work without burning out. And it means schools can operate systematically rather than reactively. Professional boundaries are not a failure of compassion — they're a requirement for effective, sustainable practice.

EBSA in Practice: Amira's Story

Context: Amira, Year 8, previously excellent attendance, began refusing school after October half-term. Initially presented as stomach aches and headaches, then visible distress. By December, attending only 40% of the time.



What Worked:

- Early identification and response prevented further entrenchment
- Graduated approach matched intervention to need
- Underlying SEND needs were identified and addressed
- Clear, time-limited plans with review dates maintained momentum
- Strong parent partnership with shared expectations
- Adjustments supported attendance rather than replacing it

What Didn't Work Initially:

- Generic anxiety support wasn't sufficient without addressing underlying SEND
- Target of full-time attendance in 4 weeks was too ambitious given complexity
- Initial plan didn't include educational psychology expertise soon enough

📌 **Key learning:** Amira's case demonstrates that EBSA rarely has a single cause or solution. The friendship issue was real but wasn't the whole picture. Underlying SEND, once identified and addressed, was crucial to progress. Persistence, professional curiosity, and willingness to review and adapt made the difference.

Reflective Practice: Examining Our EBSA Responses

Take 5 minutes to consider these questions honestly. This isn't about judgement — it's about professional reflection that improves practice. You might want to make notes or discuss with a colleague.

Are We Normalising Absence?

Think about your current or recent EBSA cases. Has partial attendance become the accepted norm? Are reduced timetables running indefinitely without clear plans to increase? Have we stopped actively working towards full attendance? If so, why? What needs to change?

Are Our Plans Time-Limited and Reviewed?

Look at any active EBSA support plans. Do they have clear review dates? Are we actually holding those reviews? When plans aren't working, do we adapt them promptly, or do we keep doing the same thing indefinitely? What gets in the way of timely review?

Are We Consistent Across Adults?

If you asked five different staff members about the same EBSA case, would they describe the same approach? Are we all following agreed strategies, or are some staff undermining the plan (even unintentionally) with different messages or responses? How could consistency improve?

Are We Acting Early Enough?

Reflect on cases where EBSA became entrenched. Were there early warning signs we missed or dismissed? Did we wait too long before implementing structure and support? What would earlier intervention have looked like? What stops us acting early?

Optional paired discussion: Share one insight or concern with a colleague. What's one change you could make to your EBSA practice based on today's learning?

What Comes Next

This module has built your understanding of EBSA and established foundational principles for anxiety-informed, boundary-holding practice. The subsequent modules will build on this foundation, moving from understanding and early support into more complex territory: when to intensify intervention, how to work effectively across agencies, when statutory processes become necessary, and how to evaluate whether our EBSA work is genuinely making a difference.

01

Targeted Interventions

Deep dive into specific strategies for different EBSA presentations. What works for anxiety-related absence in primary vs. secondary? How do we tailor support for neurodivergent pupils? When is specialist therapeutic input necessary, and how do we access it?

03

Multi-Agency Working

EBSA is never a school-only issue. How do we work effectively with CAMHS, social care, educational psychology, school nursing, and other agencies? Managing complex cases where multiple services are involved, clarifying roles and responsibilities, and ensuring coordinated rather than fragmented support.

02

Thresholds & Statutory Routes

Understanding when supportive approaches must escalate to formal processes. Local authority responsibilities, parenting contracts, Education Supervision Orders, prosecution thresholds. How to navigate these processes whilst maintaining relationships and prioritising the child's wellbeing.

04

Measuring Impact

How do we know if our EBSA work is effective? What data should we track? How do we evaluate whether individual interventions and whole-school approaches are making a genuine difference to attendance outcomes? Using evidence to refine and improve practice.

The progression: This module builds confidence in EBSA principles and early intervention. The next modules build accountability, deepen expertise, and ensure that compassion is balanced with the structures, escalation pathways, and multi-agency working that complex cases require.

Closing Message

EBSA work sits at the intersection of education, mental health, safeguarding, and family support. It requires us to hold multiple truths simultaneously: that a child's distress is genuine and their need for education is non-negotiable; that parents are doing their best and that our expectations must remain clear; that anxiety is valid and that avoidance makes it worse. This is complex, nuanced work that demands both compassion and professional courage.

Emotionally Demanding

Witnessing a child's genuine distress is hard. Hearing parents describe their morning battles is heartbreaking. Maintaining boundaries when everyone is exhausted requires emotional resilience. This work takes its toll, and that's okay to acknowledge. You're dealing with real fear, real family distress, and high stakes.

Professionally Complex

There are no simple formulas. Every case is different. What works for one pupil may be entirely wrong for another. You're balancing competing needs, limited resources, imperfect information, and uncertain outcomes. This requires professional judgement, collaboration, and the humility to adapt when approaches aren't working.

Deeply Important

For all its difficulty, this work matters profoundly. Extended absence from education causes lasting harm. When we get EBSA responses right, we don't just improve attendance statistics — we restore hope, rebuild confidence, reconnect isolated children to their peers and their futures. We genuinely change the trajectory of young lives.

Done well, EBSA work restores daily routine and structure. It builds children's capacity to manage anxiety rather than be controlled by it. It improves attendance in meaningful, sustained ways. It strengthens families who felt they were failing. It prevents the long-term harm of educational and social isolation. It demonstrates that school communities care enough to hold boundaries whilst providing support.

"Attendance is often the treatment — not the reward for recovery."

This principle challenges intuitive assumptions about anxiety and school avoidance. But the evidence is clear: supported, gradual exposure whilst maintaining expectations is what builds genuine resilience and recovery. Waiting for anxiety to disappear before expecting attendance extends suffering and entrenches avoidance.

Thank you for engaging with this complex, challenging, essential work. Your commitment to getting EBSA responses right — balancing compassion with appropriate expectations, understanding anxiety whilst refusing to be led by it — makes a profound difference to the pupils and families who need it most.

Further Reading & Support

Building expertise in EBSA requires ongoing professional learning. These resources provide evidence-based guidance, practical strategies, and deeper understanding of the research underpinning effective practice.



National Guidance

DfE: Working together to improve school attendance (2022) — statutory guidance clarifying school responsibilities, including EBSA-related absence.

SEND Code of Practice (2015) — understanding overlap between SEND and attendance difficulties, particularly Chapter 6.



Research & Evidence

Anna Freud Centre: Emotionally Based School Avoidance resources — practical guidance grounded in evidence.

EBE: "School attendance and anxiety" briefing — accessible summary of research evidence.

Educational Psychology in Practice journal — peer-reviewed articles on anxiety, SEND, and attendance.



Training & Networks

Local Educational Psychology services — many offer EBSA-specific training and consultation.

Mental Health in Schools teams — link with mental health support services for joint working and shared learning.

Attendance networks — regional or local forums for sharing practice and problem-solving complex cases.

 **Internal resources:** Ensure all staff know where to find your school's EBSA protocols, attendance policy, safeguarding procedures, and escalation pathways. Consistent access to clear guidance supports consistent practice.

Your Next Steps

Translate today's learning into concrete action. Consider what will change in your practice, your team, or your school as a result of this module.

1

Immediate Actions (This Week)

Review current EBSA cases against the graduated response framework. Are interventions matched appropriately to need? Are there cases requiring escalation? Schedule review meetings for any plans running beyond 6 weeks without clear progress.

2

Short-Term Actions (Next Month)

Audit your EBSA practice: Are early warning signs identified systematically? Do all staff understand the difference between anxiety-informed and anxiety-led responses? Is there consistency in messaging to parents? Identify one area for improvement and develop an action plan.

3

Medium-Term Development (This Term)

Strengthen staff confidence through briefings, case discussions, or additional training. Ensure pastoral staff have supervision to process the emotional demands of EBSA work. Review and refine written protocols so all staff have clarity about roles, thresholds, and escalation pathways.

4

Ongoing Practice (All Year)

Embed attendance monitoring that identifies EBSA patterns early. Maintain graduated, time-limited approaches with regular review. Build strong multi-agency relationships before crises occur. Evaluate impact: track not just attendance percentages but sustained improvement over time.

Final reflection: What is one specific change you will make to your EBSA practice based on today's learning? Write it down. Share it with a colleague. Make it happen.

Thank you for your commitment to this complex, challenging, and profoundly important work. Your thoughtful, boundaried, compassionate responses to EBSA make a genuine difference to the pupils and families who need it most.