



Anxiety Based School Avoidance (ABSA)

Information for Parents and Carers

Cardiff Educational Psychology Service

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What is ABSA?

Many children and young people worry about school at some point and might say they prefer to be at home. This is normal. Sometimes, however, a child or young person's worries may become too much and this may lead to difficulties attending school. They may show severe anxiety and emotional upset at the thought of going to school, that often results in them staying away from school.

Anxiety Based School Avoidance (ABSA) is a term used to describe when a child or young person has severe difficulty in attending school due to anxiety and emotional upset.

ABSA can result in being off school for long periods.

There is no single cause for ABSA and it is more likely to be due to a number of factors. Together, these factors lead to the child or young person finding it difficult to attend school.

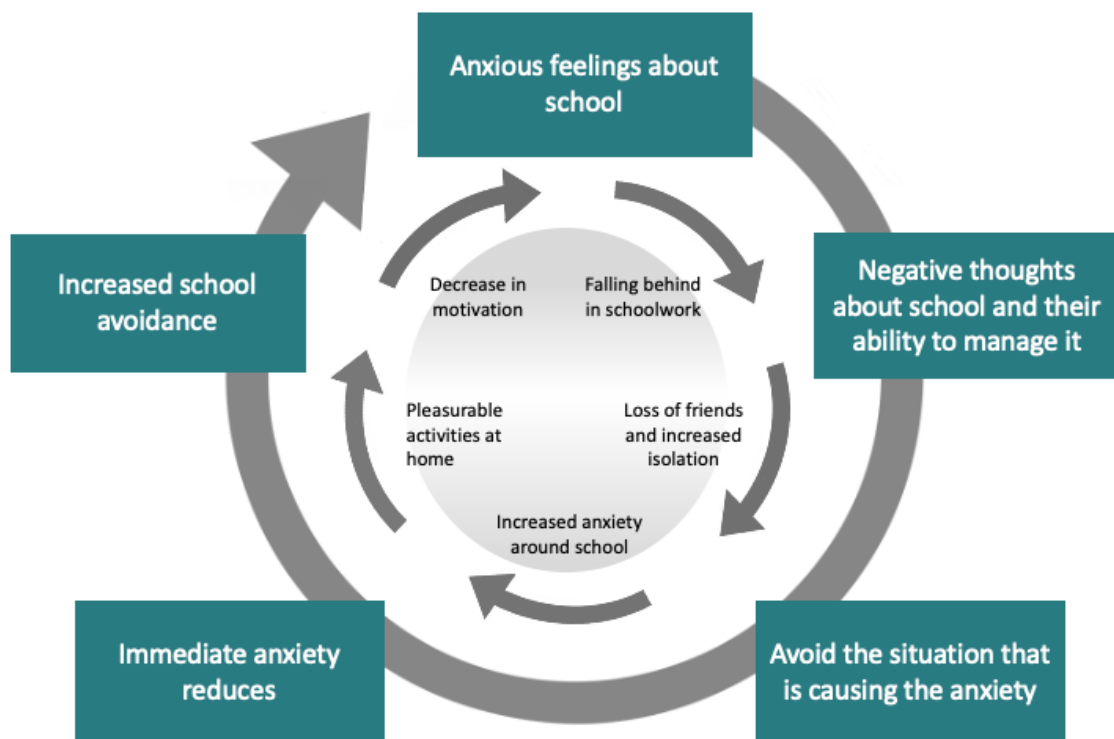
Some of the factors that can contribute to ABSA:

- Moving to new situations (e.g. Transition between school phases like from Year 2 to Year 3) or schools (primary to secondary))
- Increased educational pressures and demands (e.g. difficulties with learning/exams)
- Difficulties with peers/friendships/bullying
- School stresses (e.g. noise/overcrowding)
- Separation, loss and bereavement
- Significant changes in family circumstances and dynamics (e.g. moving house/break up)

Is your child worried about going to school?

It is very important to try and help children and young people overcome these difficulties as soon as possible. The longer a child or young person is off school, the more likely it is that they will miss out on valuable learning and friendships. This can make it even more difficult when they come back to school. Dealing with the worries early can make it easier to try to change the school avoiding behaviour.

The diagram below shows how ABSA behaviours can develop:



Signs of ABSA

These could include:



What should you do?

- As a parent it can be really difficult to see your child unhappy. Ensure you have someone to talk to such as a family member, friend or an organisation listed at the end of this leaflet.
- Remain calm and listen to your child.
- Tell the school there is a problem and work in partnership with staff to get your child to attend.
- Reassure your child that you and the school will work with them, to make school a happier place for them.
- Ask your child if anything is worrying them at home (e.g. changes/family life) or in school (e.g. work/environment/difficulties with friends or peers).
- Stay positive and try not to show your child that you are worried by being hesitant in the mornings.
- Be firm about an immediate return to school.
- Give attention to your child's ability to overcome when they say they feel unwell (e.g. noticing that drinking water has helped, or noticing them being able to get on with things).
- Keep in touch regularly with the school.
- Focus on any positive comments made about school by your child.
- Plan an enjoyable activity to do at the end of a school day.
- Reward your child's ability to attend and any evidence of coping behaviours that they display.
- Avoid reinforcing preferred or stimulating activities when your child is at home (e.g. playing computer games, watching TV or accessing social media).
- Stick to your plan long enough for it to work (it is normal for your child to become more anxious for the first couple of days).

What can you expect the school to do?

- Make early contact with you to discuss your child's reluctance to attend school.
- Listen carefully to you and your child. They should acknowledge the challenges faced by your child and you as their parent/carer.
- Carefully monitor your child's attendance and look for patterns of absenteeism.
- Help identify some of the factors contributing to the school based anxiety.
- Maintain close contact with you and your child, even during extended periods of non-attendance. An agreed member of staff should be named the link person.
- Plan a careful and gradual reintegration with you and your child. The plan should include what the next steps will be.
- If appropriate, make adjustments to your child's timetable.
- Provide a 'safe' space for your child and, where possible, access to a key adult.
- Make changes to the learning environment to create a greater sense of safety and security.
- Provide access to emotional support or social confidence support.
- Provide access to learning support if needed.
- Suggest referrals to other professionals if the problem persists.
- The school should refer to the Cardiff ABSA Guidance Document.

Talking to your child about their worries

We all find it difficult to talk about the things that make us anxious. A child or young person who is avoiding school, is likely to become anxious when they are asked to talk about returning to school. It is important to acknowledge that it may be difficult for them. Let them know you are interested in what they are thinking and how they are feeling. If they find it difficult to talk, you could ask them specific questions to help them sort through their thoughts and feelings.

Some questions you could ask are:

- What three things are you most worried about?
- What three things have you worried about recently?

It is also important to focus on the positives about school:

- What are the three best things about school?

Some children and young people may find it hard to tell you face to face. You could ask them to write it down, email, text or even draw how they are feeling.

There is also an information booklet for children and young people which include some ideas for activities children and young people can do.

Further sources of support

- **Cardiff Educational Psychology Service – 029 22 330693**
- **Cardiff Education Welfare Service – 029 20 873619**
- **Cardiff Emotional Health and Wellbeing Team – 029 22 330690**
- **School based attendance officers**
- **YoungMinds - <https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/>**