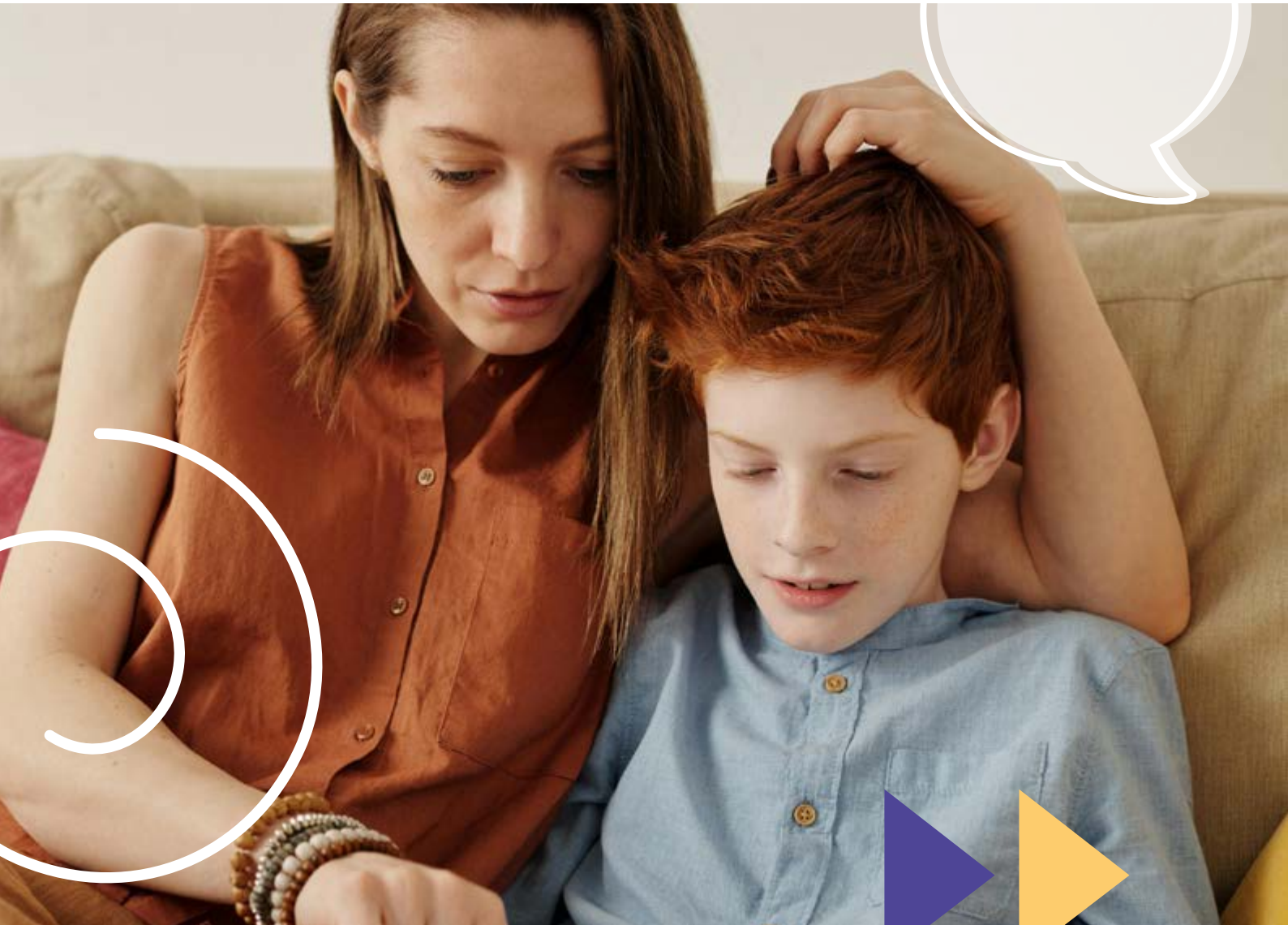



ANXIETY BASED SCHOOL AVOIDANCE (ABSA)



A GUIDE FOR PARENTS/CARERS

*A guide developed by educational psychologists in
Cardiff Educational Psychology Service and Parents First, Early Help*





This guidance has been jointly developed by educational psychologists across two Cardiff Council services; Cardiff Educational Psychology Service and Parents First, Early Help.

With thanks to colleagues across Cardiff City Council and Parents who have given feedback in developing this guidance.

This document will be reviewed annually, we would value your feedback. Please provide feedback to:

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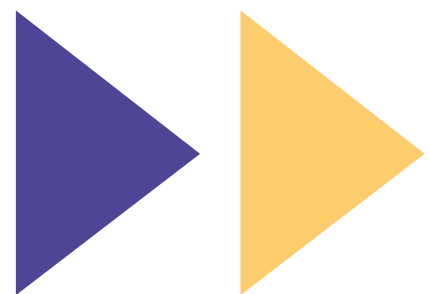
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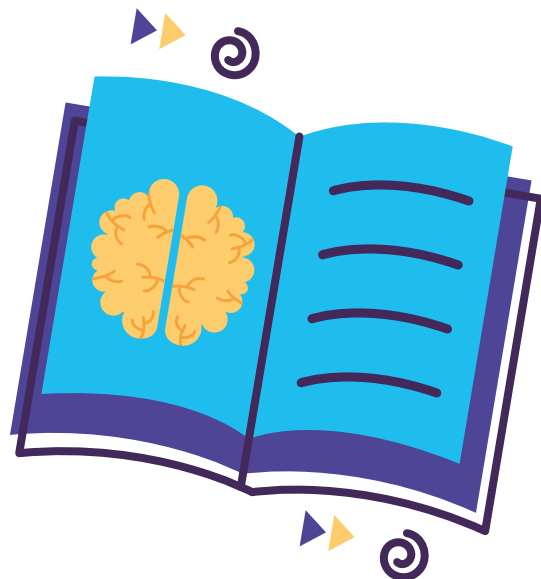
Introduction

ABSA stands for Anxiety Based School Avoidance.

It is a term used when a child or young person is having difficulties attending school due to emotional upset.

This guidance has been developed for parents and carers who feel their child may be experiencing ABSA and finding it difficult to attend school. The aims of this guidance are to:

- Explain what ABSA is and how it might look for different children/young people.
- Help you think about, and understand, difficulties your child might be experiencing.
- Give you some useful tools you can use to understand and support yourself and your child.
- Help you to get ready for talking with school or other people supporting your child/family.
- Tell you about other support for you and your child.



Every child and family situation is different so no guidance can cover every aspect of ABSA. The key message of this guidance is to talk with your child's school if you are concerned about your child feeling anxious about attending. This is important because research suggests that early help and working together with school can help. We hope this guidance can be a useful and practical tool you can use to take the first steps when working with school to support your family.

Suggested first steps to follow when your child is finding it difficult to go to school:



What is ABSA?

Feeling anxious is a normal response to a situation that we may find stressful. Many children and young people worry about school at some point and might say they prefer to be at home.

For some children and young people, however, their feelings of anxiety/upset can result in them avoiding school. This is where the term ABSA comes from. There is no one reason for ABSA and it is more likely to be due to many different reasons such as:

- Big changes (e.g. transition between school phases such as from Year 2 to Year 3 or from primary to secondary).
- Pressures and demands (e.g. difficulties with learning/exams).
- Difficulties with peers/friendships.
- School stresses (e.g. noise/crowds).
- Separation, loss, and bereavement.
- Changes in family circumstances (e.g. moving house/parental relationships).

This guidance uses ‘ABSA’ because this is what schools in Cardiff are also using and we want to make sure you, as a parent, can work together with school, using the same words. There are many ways to describe when a child is having difficulties in attending school. Some of them that you might have heard are “EBSNA (Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance)”, “school avoidance” and “school refusal”. It is not a diagnosis or choice your child is making - it means that a child’s thoughts and feelings are affecting them being able to go to school.

Is your child worried about going to school?

Helping children and young people with ABSA as soon as possible is important. The longer a child or young person is off school, the harder it can be for them to return. The diagram below shows how anxiety about school can lead to a cycle of avoidance:

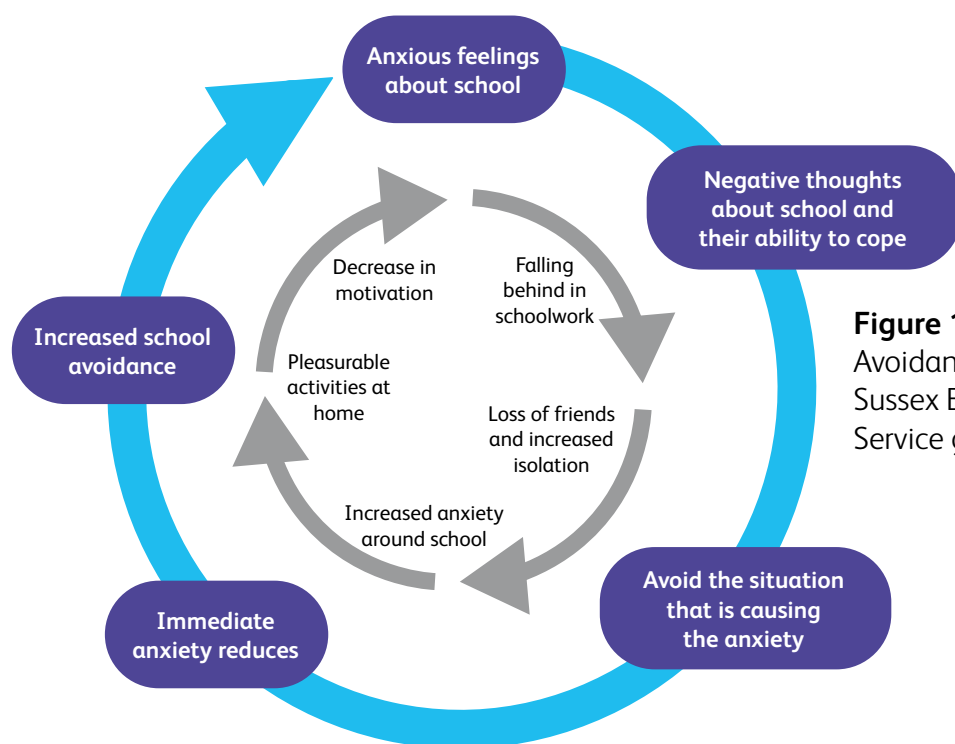


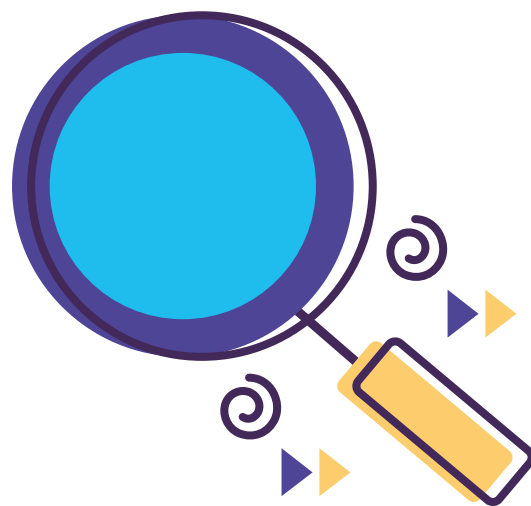
Figure 1. The Cycle of School Avoidance, taken from West Sussex Educational Psychology Service guidance

What can ABSA look like?

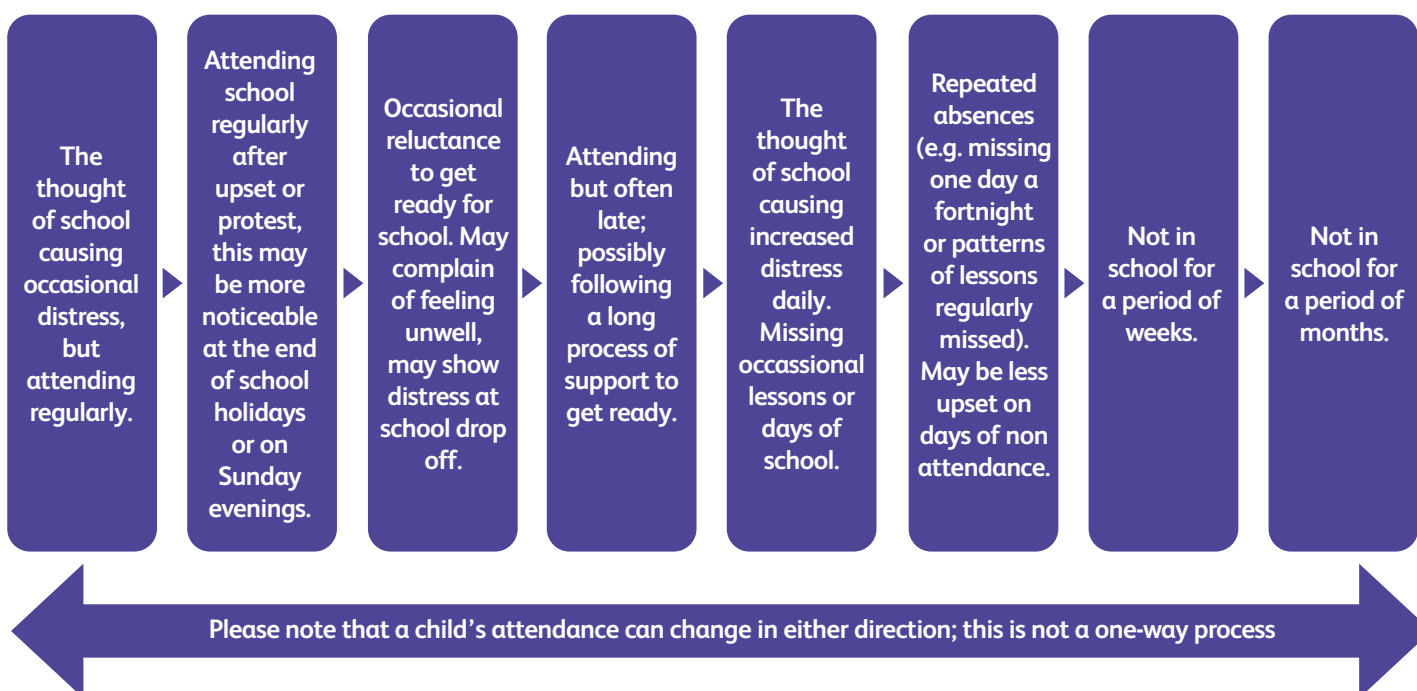
Anxiety based school avoidance is not usually a sudden event and we can think of it as something that can change over time.

Early signs that your child might be finding it difficult to attend school can include:

- not wanting to get ready for school,
- feeling unwell on school days,
- missing some lessons, or avoiding things they find difficult in the school day (e.g. the bus, supply teachers, break times).



The image below shows one way to think about how ABSA can develop. Children and young people can present at different points along the continuum on different days and points in time.



Adapted from Kearney (2008)

It is important to note that:

- Not everyone will go through each of the above stages. The keypoint is that early signs might be noted at home before they are seen in school.
- Improvements to attending school and feelings about school can happen at any point.
- Showing some feelings of worry about school does not always lead to ongoing ABSA.
- Acting early with school to understand and support your child is important.
- It may be helpful to make note of any early signs that you notice. On page 7, there is a tool you could use to do this. It may be helpful to take this along to any school-based meetings and share with the teacher or other people working with your child/family.

A tool for parents/carers

Looking at the stages on the previous page, where would you say your child is now?

What are you seeing your child do and say that makes you think that?

How has their attendance changed over time (look at the diagram on the previous page)?

What were you seeing your child do and say at those points? What might have made this better or worse? If it got better what helped? If it got worse, what else was going on?

How have you supported your child at these different times?

E.g what things have you tried, and how did that go?

What might the first sign of progress look like for your child?

What would the first small step of progress look like towards this? No matter how small. What do you think might help them to get there?

Are there any times it has been better? For example, days or times your child has been happier to attend? Or been at a different point on the diagram? What helped them to attend? Is there something different about school or home on those days? What was happening at this time?

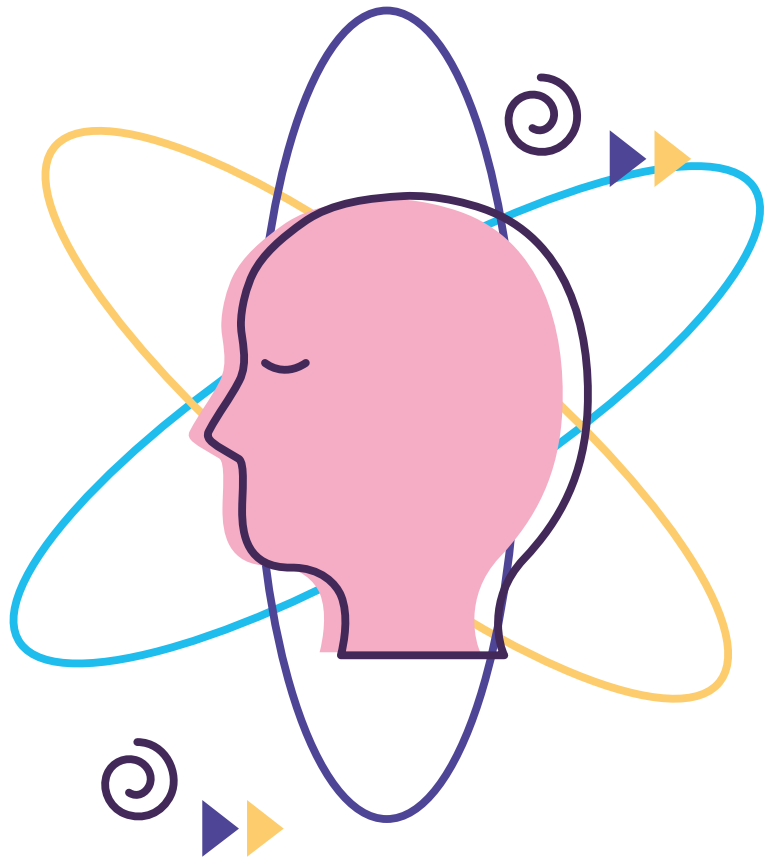
Neurodivergence and ABSA

There is growing research indicating that children and young people who are neurodivergent (e.g. with autism, dyslexia, or ADHD) may be more likely to find school a difficult place to be. This may be because neurodivergent children and young people can face extra difficulties in school. Examples of these difficulties might be:

- Sensory differences (e.g. sound, touch, light) can make school feel overwhelming e.g. school life can include busy corridors, lots of noise and bright lighting which may be difficult for them to tolerate.
- In school there are lots of relationships to manage with adults and other pupils. This can be difficult for those who have differences in understanding and predicting social situations.
- School involves lots of change between activities and classrooms which can be hard if you find change difficult.

Coping with this, all while trying to behave and act in ways that are expected by friends, other pupils and teachers can take lots of energy and effort.

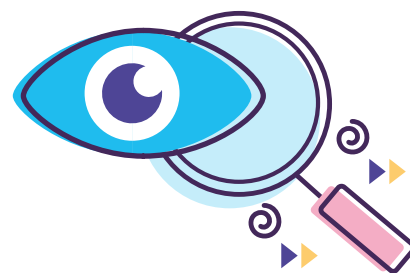
Every ABSA experience is different, so there is no 'one size fits all' advice. However, it is important that parents, and all adults helping the neurodivergent child, work to identify what they are finding difficult and stressful in school. This is the focus of the following sections which are suitable for all children.



The tools in this guidance can be used with all children and young people, including those who are neurodivergent. However, you will know best what your child may respond to. You may feel a different approach is needed to gain their views. Links for some possible further ideas are available at the end of this guidance.

Spotting the signs

There are lots of reasons why some children may be at greater risk of experiencing ABSA. Being aware of the early signs of ABSA can help school and parents to put early support in place to help children to feel less worried, and more comfortable, about attending school.



There are 4 areas noted below:

- Physical (what is happening in the body)
- Emotional (Feelings, emotions)
- Behavioural (What you see your child doing)
- Cognitive (how the brain and body work).

It can be helpful to look at these four areas together because they can help us to notice the early signs of ABSA. Children may display several, but not all, of the signs noted below:

Please write down below any signs you may have noticed in your child (if any) and note anything extra that may not be listed in the space provided. It is important to note that the examples below do not cover all possibilities, as every experience of ABSA is different.

Physical	Emotional
<p><i>Some examples could include: feeling sick, aches and pains, headache, crying, sweating, increased heartrate, reduced appetite, complaints of feeling unwell, poor sleep.</i></p>	<p><i>Some examples could include: tearful, feeling scared, low mood or changes in mood, withdrawn/quiet, low confidence, low self esteem</i></p>
How the brain works (cognitive)	Behavioural
<p><i>Some examples can include: negative thoughts, poor concentration, lack of motivation, confusion, learning concerns, difficulty in starting and finishing tasks, speaking negatively about themselves.</i></p>	<p><i>Some examples can include: lateness, difficulty attending school/staying in class, seeking to stay at home for minor illness, lack of self-care, avoiding social situations, challenging behaviours e.g. aggression.</i></p>

Understanding why this might be happening for your child

If your child is experiencing ABSA, it can be helpful to think about what might be adding to your child's feelings about school and what might be keeping these feelings going. This could then be used to see how you can help your child.

When we think about ABSA we need to try and understand the reasons they are finding it hard to go to school (e.g. Does it help them avoid something that is difficult or help them to do something more enjoyable?). Behaviour is a way of communicating and this is the same for ABSA. When we understand why and how it is happening, we can begin to think about how to support it. The way you and your child's school support your child will be different, depending on the why and how.

Use this space to note down any thoughts you have about why the ABSA may have started:



Is there anything going on for your child or your family that may have led to, or made more likely, the ABSA?

Examples could include:

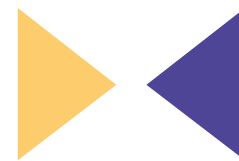
- Having someone else at home not attending school (for whatever reason)
- A change coming up/just happened (e.g. year 6 into high school)
- Difficulties with friendships or learning
- Changes in home life or the family (e.g. separation, loss, house move, new baby)



Push and Pull factors

There can be reasons that make it easier for your child to attend school, and reasons that your child may prefer to stay at home. We can think of these as 'push' and 'pull' factors.

- Push factors might be things that help your child to attend school.
- Pull factors can be reasons that your child may want to stay at home.



Better understanding of these factors can help with your child's attendance.

What helps your child to attend school?	What makes it hard for your child to attend school?
<p>Examples could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Friendship group • Good relationships with staff • Extra-curricular activities (e.g. after school clubs) • Play/lunch times <p>Please list your thoughts below:</p>	<p>Examples could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thoughts and feelings about learning • Difficulties with friends • Illness • Worries <p>Please list your thoughts below:</p>
<p>What reasons might your child have for wanting to stay at home and why might this be important to them?</p>	
<p><i>We can't list all possible reasons but here are some examples to get you started. They may help you to think about what your child might be gaining/avoiding by staying at home.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wanting to stay with parents/grandparents/siblings because a family member may be unwell • Use of technology e.g. X-Box, iPad because this gives them a sense of success and contact with friends • Having quiet time because they feel that school is too busy • Finding it hard to return to school after an absence (e.g. illness or school holidays) because they may be worried about being behind with learning. • Avoiding parts of school life they find tricky e.g. school events etc because they find change of routine difficult <p>Please list your thoughts below:</p>	

Talking to your child about their worries and their strengths

A child or young person who is finding it difficult to attend school may become anxious or worried when asked to talk about this. Explaining that you understand why this might be and that you would like to know more about their views and how they are feeling can help.

If they find it difficult to talk, you could ask them questions to help think about their thoughts and feelings. It is important to talk about strengths, and how they can be built on to. Some questions you could ask are:

- What are the three best things about school?
- What three things are you most worried about?
- Who do you feel you can talk to at 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 are different ways and activities that could be used to help your child share what they are thinking and feeling. One useful activity to start with is looking at a 'good day/bad day' (see activity below). This can help us learn more about what matters to someone and what help they might need to have more good days. It can help to share this information with school to support their attendance.

What does a GOOD day look like? 😊	Prompts: What would happen when... What would you/others be doing?	What does a BAD day look like? 😞
	...when you wake up until you leave for school?	
	...on the way to school?	
	...when you arrive at school?	
	...during your lessons?	
	...during break time?	
	...during lunch time?	
	...on the way home?	
	...when you get home?	
What would help your child to have more good days than bad?		

Helping yourself to help your child

This section is here because having a child with ABSA can be very difficult for you as a parent, and for the whole family. For example:



- Seeing your child feel anxious or worried can make you feel anxious too - we all want our children to be ok and it can feel difficult when they aren't.
- It is natural to feel many other feelings about your child's difficulties with school. You might feel guilt, shame, confusion, worry, anger, frustration, sadness, hopelessness. All these emotions are ok **and** difficult to feel.
- Feeling these emotions and seeing your child upset can make it hard to know how to respond. It can be hard to find a balance between letting your child know you understand why they find it difficult **and** expecting them to attend school.
- Ongoing non-attendance can impact your work and day to day life and the things you want and need to do.
- You may find that leaving the house to do other things (e.g. exercise, hobbies, shopping) are also difficult. Not being able to do the things you need can impact how you feel and your patience. This can make it hard to respond calmly and with understanding.
- Not being in school everyday can lead to a loss of support for you also, you might have less contact with other parents and not be able to see school staff.
- Siblings can be impacted too. They might be less willing to attend school if they think their brother/sister is having a 'nice' time at home with family/carers. You may have less time to give them, due to the focus that is needed on the child having difficulty attending school.



During this difficult time it may be helpful to remember:

- Your child is finding it difficult to attend school now **and** things can change.
- Your child is trying to cope with difficult feelings. They are doing their best with the skills they have right now, as are you.
- Work with your child's school, they may be able to make changes that can help.
- Small changes can make a big difference.

Securing your own oxygen mask first




We can think of this like the advice people are given on an aeroplane; to secure our own oxygen mask first before helping others. Another saying is that you can't pour from an empty cup. To take care of others well, we must take care of ourselves first. This idea can at first feel selfish, but you can't help someone else to breathe if you can't breathe yourself. It is harder to provide support to your child if you are not physically and mentally ok too.

One of the first ways to do this is by taking care of yourself, this can be called 'practising self-care'. By practising self-care you're also showing your child the importance of looking after themselves. Earlier, we talked about some of the ways that having a child who is experiencing ABSA can impact family members and this can influence the ways we look after ourselves.



Research tells us there are 5 steps (see image below) you can take to improve your mental health and wellbeing. These things could help you to feel more able to help your child. You might like to plan the ways in which you can look after yourself in the table below and look at the NHS email link for more information. The ideas noted in the link below are not just for adults; they can also help you to think of other ways of supporting your child's wellbeing: [5 steps to mental wellbeing - NHS \(www.nhs.uk\)](https://www.nhs.uk)



My Five Ways to Well-Being	Ways in which I can do this
<p>Connect with other people. Good relationships are important for your mental wellbeing. They can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • help you to build a sense of belonging and self-worth • give you an opportunity to share positive experiences • provide emotional support and allow you to support others 	
<p>Be Active. Being active is not only great for your physical health and fitness. Evidence also shows it can also improve your mental wellbeing by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • raising your self-esteem • helping you to set goals or challenges and achieve them • causing chemical changes in your brain which can help to positively change your mood 	
<p>Take notice. Pay attention to the present moment (mindfulness). Paying more attention to the present moment can improve your mental wellbeing. This includes your thoughts and feelings, your body and the world around you.</p> <p>Some people call this awareness “mindfulness”. Mindfulness can help you enjoy life more and understand yourself better. It can positively change the way you feel about life and how you approach challenges.</p> 	
<p>Keep Learning. Research shows that learning new skills can also improve your mental wellbeing by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • boosting self-confidence and raising self-esteem • helping you to build a sense of purpose • helping you to connect with others <p>Even if you feel like you do not have enough time, or you may not need to learn new things, there are lots of different ways to bring learning into your life.</p> 	
<p>Give. Research suggests that acts of giving and kindness can help improve your mental wellbeing by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • creating positive feelings and a sense of reward • giving you a feeling of purpose and self-worth • helping you connect with other people <p>It could be small acts of kindness towards other people, or larger ones like volunteering in your local community.</p> 	

Where to go for support



[Cardiff Family Advice and Support](http://www.cardiffamilies.co.uk) (www.cardiffamilies.co.uk)

[Barnardo's](http://www.barnardos.org.uk/get-support/services/family-wellbeing-service-cardiff) (www.barnardos.org.uk/get-support/services/family-wellbeing-service-cardiff)

[School In-Reach Service for Cardiff and the Vale](https://cavoungwellbeing.wales/young-people/emotional-wellbeing-mental-health/our-services/school-in-reach/)

(https://cavoungwellbeing.wales/young-people/emotional-wellbeing-mental-health/our-services/school-in-reach/)

[School Nurse in Cardiff Webpage](https://cavuhb.nhs.wales/our-services/children-young-people-family-health-services-cypf/early-intervention-and-prevention-services/school-nursing/)

(https://cavuhb.nhs.wales/our-services/children-young-people-family-health-services-cypf/early-intervention-and-prevention-services/school-nursing/)

[Home Start Wales](http://www.homestartcymru.org.uk/) (www.homestartcymru.org.uk/)

[Emotional Well-Being and Mental Health for Cardiff and the Vale](https://cavoungwellbeing.wales/) (https://cavoungwellbeing.wales/)

[C.A.L.L. Mental Health Helpline - Community Advice and Listening Line](https://callhelpline.org.uk/) (https://callhelpline.org.uk/)

When you first become concerned about ABSA, it may be helpful to speak with the **Additional Learning Needs Co-ordinator (ALNCo)** at your child's school. They will be able to explain what support is available at school from Cardiff Inclusion Service e.g., Educational Psychology Service and the Emotional Health and Wellbeing Specialist Teacher Team.

Other Helpful websites:

It may also be helpful to know what guidance Cardiff schools have been given in relation to ABSA as you will be working in partnership with them. Guidance available to Cardiff schools can be found here:

[Anxiety Based School Avoidance | Cardiff Education Services](https://cardiffeducationsservices.co.uk/) (https://cardiffeducationsservices.co.uk/)

Advice for Parents:

[School Anxiety and Refusal | Parent Guide to Support | YoungMinds](http://www.youngminds.org.uk/parent/parents-a-z-mental-health-guide/school-anxiety-and-refusal)

(www.youngminds.org.uk/parent/parents-a-z-mental-health-guide/school-anxiety-and-refusal)

[Square Peg](http://www.teamsquarepeg.co.uk) (www.teamsquarepeg.co.uk)

Some tools to help you talk to your child:

[GUIDE: Back to School Anxiety - How To Help - Dr Pooky Knightsmith](https://www.pookyknightsmith.com/guide-back-to-school-anxiety-how-to-help)

(https://www.pookyknightsmith.com/guide-back-to-school-anxiety-how-to-help)



[A Self-Help Workbook for Young People \(aged 11-18\) Experiencing School Based Anxiety](https://cavuhb.nhs.wales/files/resilience-project/rp-changes-18-8/school-based-anxiety-self-help-workbook)

(https://cavuhb.nhs.wales/files/resilience-project/rp-changes-18-8/school-based-anxiety-self-help-workbook)

National Autistic Society (NAS) Guidelines for Parents

[What can I do if my child wont go to school \(autism.org.uk\)](http://www.autism.org.uk)

(www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/education/attendance-problems)