

## **Creating a Compassionate Path Forward: Addressing Emotionally Based School Avoidance at New Park Academy**

At New Park Academy, we understand that not all school absences are the same. Our primary goal is to work collaboratively with students and their families to ensure that every child can access an education that suits their individual needs. Research acknowledges the critical role of regular attendance in fostering a child's overall development (Hayne and Gallé-Tessonneau, 2020). Additionally, the importance of attendance is highlighted as a key priority for local authorities in the statutory guidance, *Working Together to Improve School Attendance* (DfE, 2024). We are committed to addressing the individual challenges that may hinder a child's attendance and working together to develop supportive strategies that ensure every student has the opportunity to thrive academically and emotionally.

We recognise that not all absences stem from behavioural issues. For some students, attending school has become a significant source of anxiety. In these cases, non-attendance is often a stress response triggered by factors within their environment (Duffy, 2023). Rather than viewing this solely as a punitive matter, we aim to adopt a holistic and compassionate approach.

Our ethos is to be curious, not judgemental, about a student's absence. We seek to understand the underlying difficulties and offer families the appropriate support. Together, we work to uncover the stressors, barriers, and protective factors at play, and collaboratively develop a plan to address and, where possible, alleviate them.

The challenge of Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) extends far beyond the UK. Global research highlights that EBSA—distinct from general absenteeism—is a widespread issue, deeply rooted in social and separation anxiety, worry, distress, and sadness (Elliott and Place, 2019). Though EBSA has existed for many years, awareness has grown significantly since the onset of Covid-19, bringing greater attention to the emotional struggles faced by students. Extended periods of lockdown and disruptions to normal routines have exacerbated existing emotional challenges and introduced new ones. For many students, the pandemic has heightened separation anxiety and fear of returning to the classroom, leading to an increase in EBSA.

### **How is EBSA different to general absenteeism?**

Unlike general school absenteeism, EBSA presents distinct challenges. According to Havik et al. (2014), students experiencing EBSA typically desire to attend school like their peers but find themselves unable to do so due to significant emotional distress associated with school attendance. These students often exhibit symptoms of distress well in advance, not as a result of misbehaviour, but because their anxiety becomes so overwhelming that attending school feels impossible (Duffy, 2023).

*'The stomach cramps, diarrhoea, nausea and headaches would start the weekend before school was due to start or the night before... They were worried so much they couldn't sleep and would become so dysregulated in the morning, often kicking out in the house and the car. It was so distressing to watch... I knew they had friends at school*

*and said they liked being there but their anxiety was overwhelming and took a toll on the whole family.'* - **Parent of Year 9 student**

The pressures of school and life can sometimes surpass a child's ability to manage, leading to avoidance as a coping mechanism (Lazarus, 2006). Many parents are acutely aware of their child's struggles and have often exhausted numerous strategies in an attempt to encourage school attendance.

#### **Our Approach at New Park Academy:**

- **Understanding:** We take the time to truly listen and explore the reasons behind a child's absence. By gathering a comprehensive understanding of the situation both at home and in school, we can identify the most appropriate ways to provide support.
- **Healing:** We recognise that families need space to recover. Helping both the child and their parents regain a sense of calm is essential, allowing them to restore balance and rebuild trust in a positive way forward.
- **Partnership:** Through a strong partnership with students and their families, we work together to find practical solutions. By maintaining open communication and carefully observing signs of stress, we ensure that children remain in a manageable state of well-being, avoiding excessive pressure.

We encourage parents to reach out as early as possible if they have concerns about their child's attendance. Together, we can identify potential stressors early on—both at home and in school—and intervene with tailored support to prevent prolonged school avoidance. Hamilton (2024) highlighted two key psychological factors common in students experiencing long-term avoidance: a lack of belonging and a loss of agency. To address this, we aim to create interventions that foster genuine belonging and reduce the need for masking, all while empowering children to take an active role in shaping their educational journey. We achieve this through individualised educational programmes that cater to student's unique needs and strengths. Access to therapeutic interventions helps address emotional and psychological challenges, while our multi-agency approach ensures that students and families receive coordinated and comprehensive support. By integrating a holistic curriculum, we engage students in ways that promote their overall well-being, encouraging them to participate fully and confidently in their learning experience.

By working in partnership with families and offering a compassionate, individualised approach, we can help students overcome these challenges and create a more supportive path forward. Together, we will ensure that each child is empowered to thrive academically and emotionally, navigating their educational journey with confidence and resilience.

# Daily Attendance Procedure

**9:00- 9:30**

Staff take class register. Missing students marked with N code if no reason has been given for absence.

**9:30 - 10:00**

Attendance Officer sends initial text message to parents/carers asking for reason for absence

**11:00 - 12:00**

Attendance Officer makes phone calls/individual messages to parent/carers if no contact has not been made.

## Welfare Checks

Undertaken for the following students without contact from home:

Day 1 -CIN/CP

Day 2- Other students deemed vulnerable

Day 3- All students

## Police welfare check

Considered on Day 3 of no contact after welfare checks  
or when significant concerns are raised at discretion of SLT/Safeguarding before Day 3

## Student Support

- Counselling
- Mentoring
- Nurture support
- Safe spaces in school
- Therapeutic art and baking
- Therapy dogs
- Flexible learning options
- Individual timetable/Phased returns

## Family Support

- Listening, understanding and partnership working
- One to one check in with parents/carers
- Designated point of contact
- Visual timetables
- Early Help Assessment
- Self care guidance for parents/carers

## External Support

- Team around the Family / Multi-agency support
- Speech & Language
- Educational Psychology
- CAMHS
- Alternative Provision
- Referrals for financial or social support
- Schools Attendance Team support

## References

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