

*Understanding
and supporting
those with
emotionally
based school
avoidance
(EBSA)*

*Dr Tina Rae
30th January
2023
4.15pm –
5.15pm*



**CHARTERED
COLLEGE OF
TEACHING**

**Understanding &
Supporting Children
& Young People
with Emotionally
Based School
Avoidance (EBSA)**

Aims

1

Defining School Refusal/avoidance/EBSA Impact and specifically within the context of COVID and the current context of war and a recession

2

Highlighting Adverse Childhood Experiences, Toxic Stress, and the link with School Refusal/EBSA

3

Clarifying Doing What Works: Relationships, Team Approach, and Behavioural and Therapeutic Interventions including developing systems for reintegration



The key concern across all key stages

- Pupil attendance has not returned to pre-pandemic levels, and this is causing concern for schools, Ofsted and the DfE.
- As highlighted in the guidance *Working together to improve school attendance* (first published May 2022), there are two key reasons why attendance matters:
- there's a correlation between high academic performance and high attendance
- regular attendance is a protective factor for more vulnerable students.
- While the guidance is currently non-statutory, 'subject to Parliament, the Secretary of State has committed to this guidance becoming statutory when parliamentary time allows (this will be no sooner than September 2023).' (See paragraph 1 of the guidance.)
- The Schools Bill features four proposed laws around attendance, including a requirement for schools to publish their attendance policy.

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The problem

- *“School refusal occurs when stress exceeds support, when risks are greater than resilience and when ‘pull’ factors that promote school non-attendance overcome the ‘push’ factors that encourage attendance”*
- (Thambirajah et al, 2008: p. 33).

What do you think the differences are?

- School phobic?

- Truant?





Our language matters

- **The language we use really does matter as the words reflect the lens through which we see the behaviour and which others are then invited to use or adopt. School 'refusal' strongly infers that the behaviour is 'deliberate' or 'chosen' which has significant implications for possible responses suggesting or potentially prompting those which may be punitive in nature.**
- ***Most of the current literature makes reference to 'phobia' and 'refusal' – just bear this in mind. I am quoting but MY preferred terminology is Emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA).***

School Refusal, Absenteeism and Adverse Childhood Experiences: The Intersection of Toxic Stress, Mental Health and School Attendance

- Low income
- Homeless
- Transient families





Transition from Primary to secondary school – increased risk of toxic stress



A difficult time for all



Vulnerable groups most at risk
ASD/ADHD/MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS



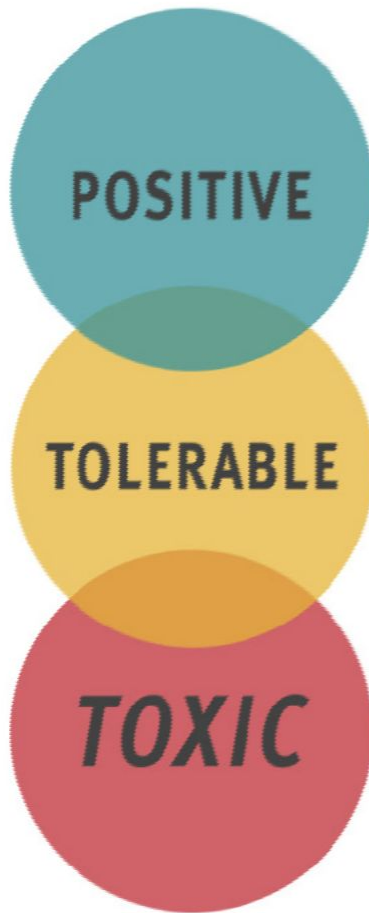
SEN and Complex needs



Warning signs

- Increase anxiety
- Decline in punctuality
- Negative talk about school
- Reduced engagement
- Atypical behaviour
- Displays of anger/anxiety/stress

Stress Matters



Brief increases in heart rate,
mild elevations in stress hormone levels.

Serious, temporary stress responses,
buffered by supportive relationships.

Prolonged activation of stress
response systems in the absence
of protective relationships.

Many (but not all)
children who are
chronically absent
suffer from the
effects of Toxic
Stress.

Traditionally occurs when.....

- Transition between primary and secondary education
- Loss or bereavement within the family
- A change in friendship groups or bullying
- A prolonged absence



COVID-19

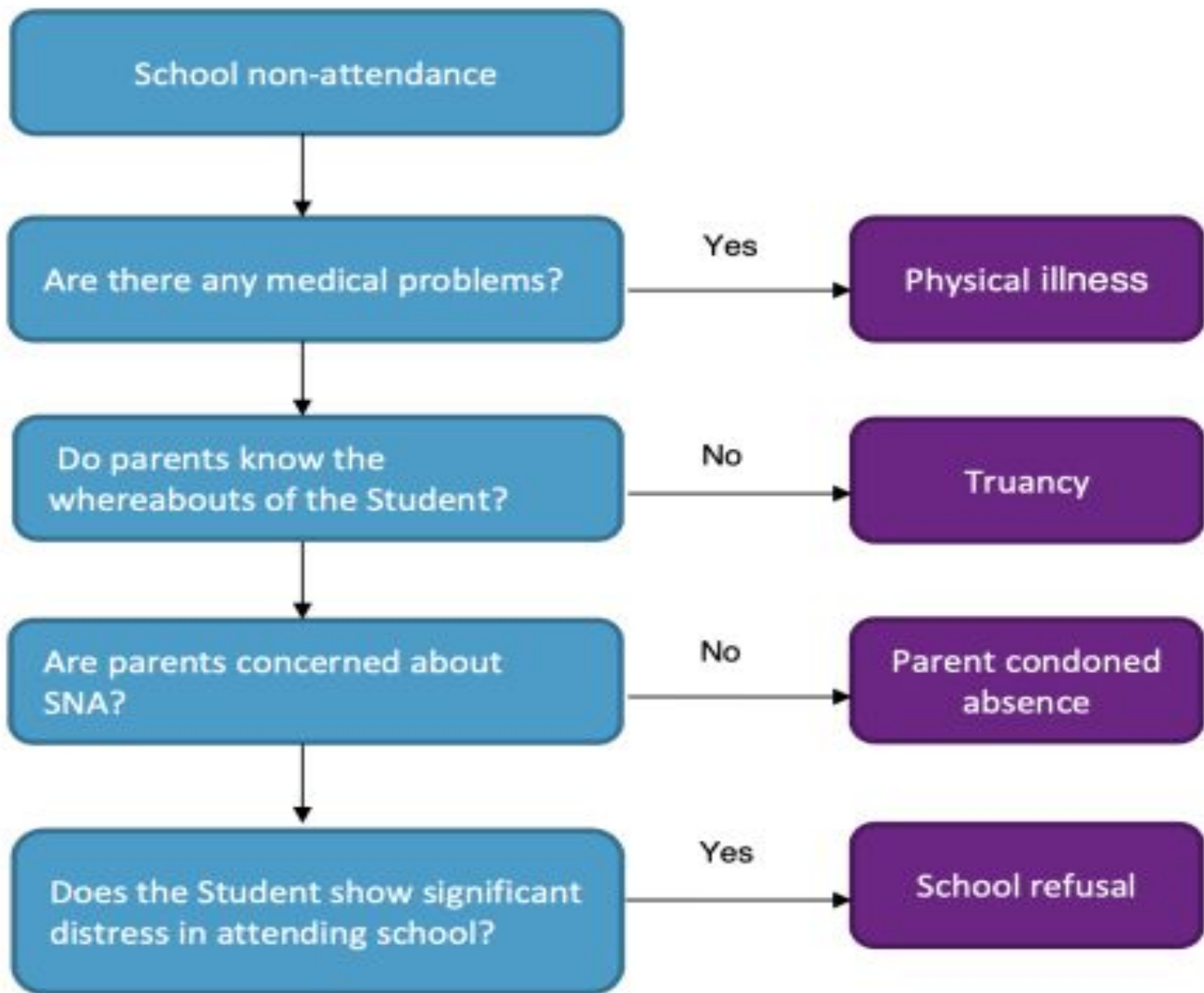
- All of these triggers can be associated with the **pandemic** in ways that need no further illustration.
- We can predict, therefore, that many more pupils – and their families – will now struggle with this issue.



The school response

- If schools are to respond appropriately to school refusal/avoidance, then the starting point is to distinguish it from the other causes of persistent absence. Thambirajah, Grandson and De Hayes (2008) devised a simple flow chart for this purpose:







Co-regulation is an essential – we can all do this better!

- Understanding and managing anxiety
- Knowing the neuroscience
- Emotion coaching
- Authentic listening
- Knowing techniques to self soothe AND MODELLING THESE
- Using the language of compassion and kindness
- Developing therapeutic relationships





The aim of the therapeutic relationship is to share adult calm. As regulated adults, if we are aware of, and attuned to our own emotions and responses, we sense our body states and ask questions that help us to respond in a trauma-reducing not trauma inducing way.

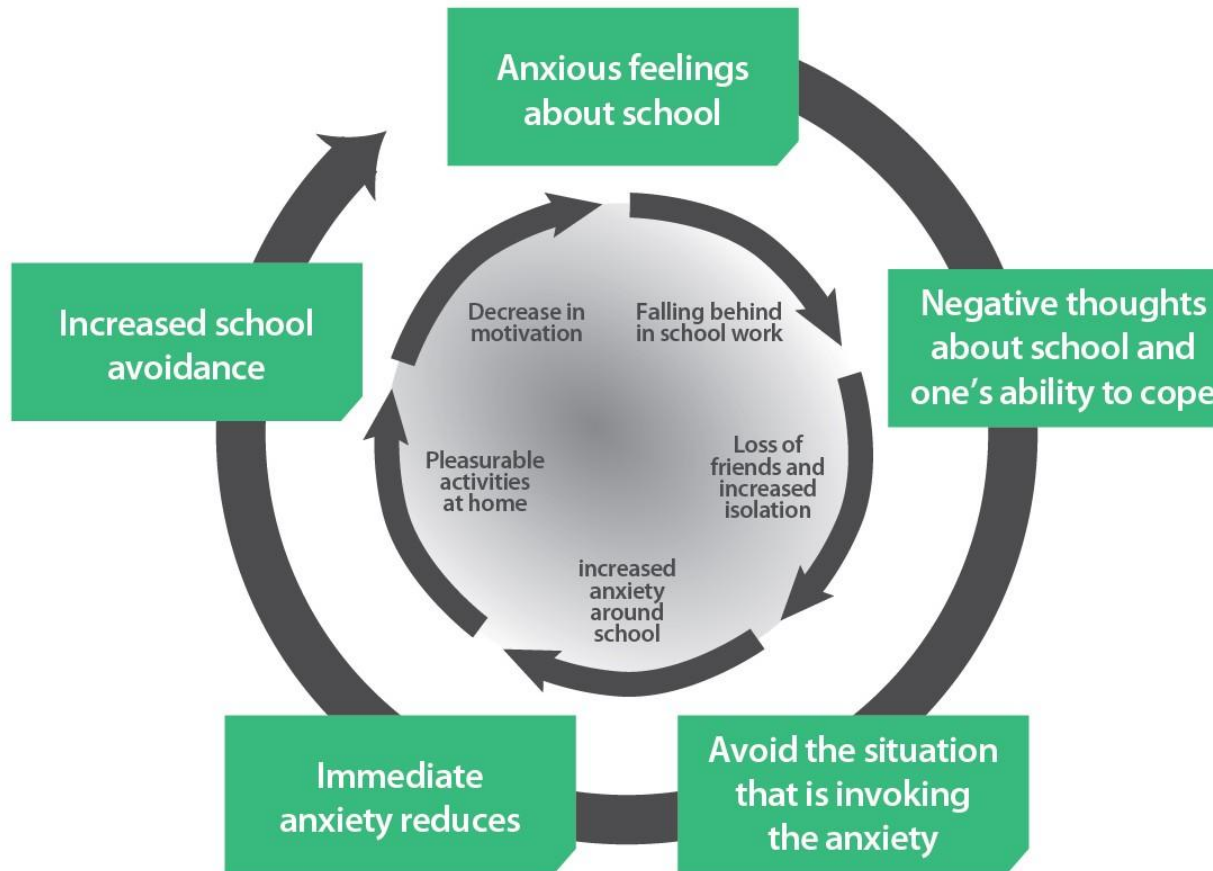
Phrases for calming an anxious/traumatised child and what to say (your language and tone matters!)

- **1. Safety**
 - I'm here for you, I'm staying here, You're going to be ok
- **2. Physiology**
 - This will pass, your body is responding in an anxious way, give it a minute or two and it will pass, you've been through it before you can do it again
- **3. Validation**
 - That must be so hard, I'm sorry this is making you feel nervous, that sounds so hard do you want to talk it through, it's not silly you feel like this – it matters, I can see you are worried, how can I help right now?

(Thanks to Pooky Knightsmith)



Understanding anxiety is an essential





What helps in school

- **Early identification** of the issues and a **quick response** to re-engaging with the pupil
- **Positive relationships** with educational staff
- **Positive peer relationships**
- Having a **designated area** in which to retreat if feeling under threat
- Having an **empathic adult** to talk issues through with
- **Planned transition** from primary to secondary school
- A **trusted adult** who can negotiate the timetable and support a more flexible approach
- **Lack of bullying**
- Opportunities to engage in **extra-curricular activities**
- A well organised and responsive **SEN department**
- Schools whose staff are **ALL** aware of the issues and how to deal with them
- A welcoming, nurturing context which promotes a sense of **belonging**



Tip 1

Create a predictable and consistent environment by explaining expectations, setting boundaries and creating routines



Tip 2

Welcome the child back to school
AUTHENTICALLY
and let them know how
happy you are
that they made
it



Tip 3

Enable readiness for learning by reducing heightened emotional states

- Calm corners/safe spaces
- Worry boxes
- Talk time
- Scheduled talk time
- Physical activity



Tip 4

Build in regular times throughout the day to engage in activities to reduce emotional arousal



Tip 5 Teach self regulation/ Skills training and therapeutic techniques for anxiety

Deep Breathing

Mindfulness

Breathing exercises

Noticing exercises

Grounding exercises

Progressive Muscle
Relaxation

Mental
Imagery/Visualization

Systematic
Desensitization

Cognitive
restructuring

Thought stopping

Activity scheduling

Problem solving

The Apple technique

Happiness boosters

Advice for CYP in developing their personal Anxiety support plan

This is about what works for you – not for anyone else



There are no right or wrong answers so if something works, write it down even if it feels strange or weird

Try to be as specific as possible when you note down your ideas as this will make it easier to follow your plan at times when your Anxious feelings seem to be taking over

Be flexible – adapt and change your plan over time, adding new ideas as you get them and binning those that don't work for you



My Anxiety Support plan

- What are my triggers?
- What makes it worse?
- What helps / when is it not so bad?
- What small steps can I take now?
- 3 things I can do to calm myself straight away
- Things I can do every day to look after my wellbeing – Activity scheduling etc
- People I can go to for help/to talk
- List any websites, helplines or text lines that you may find helpful.
- Having at least one source of support that is available 24/7 is helpful as you never know when you might need support

Tip 6

- Work with the family by enabling open and honest communication – they have probably been struggling for some time



Tip 7

Develop a signal with the child so they can communicate when they are overwhelmed e.g. show a card or use BSL



Make break times restorative by setting activities and creating structure and routine

Tip 8

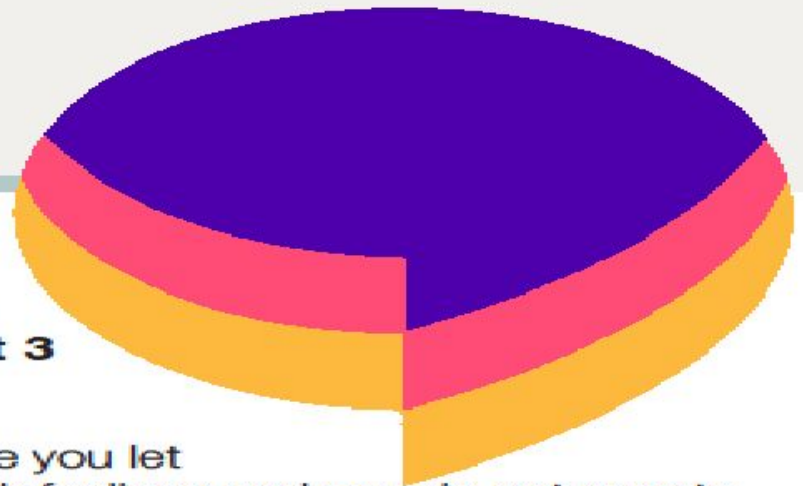


Develop a Sunday evening plan with the family and a special Monday morning school plan

Tip 9



Sunday evening plan



Soothe – do some calming activities and make the last things at night soothing – gentle music, story for younger ones, soft lighting, **talk about 3 good things before bed.**

Understand – make sure you let them know that you do understand their feelings and you do not negate or dismiss them - you understand how hard it is but it will get better in time! **Develop your script for this if appropriate.**

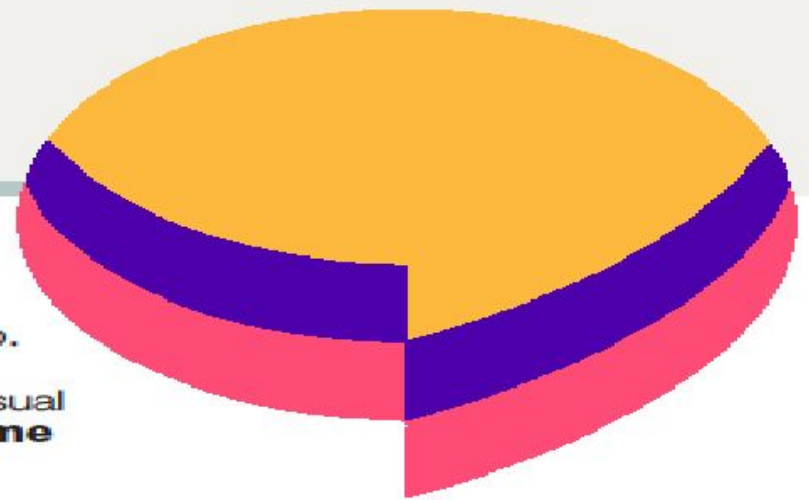
Neutralise – record any worries in a worry book and then talk through each one helping the child to see a solution/where they are catastrophising and **show them the evidence against any irrational thoughts/thinking patterns.**

Decide – on a plan of action and go through it step by step – this is what we will do tomorrow. Work out the schedule and ensure that everything is ready – book, bag, PE kit *etc* and laid out for the next morning. **Make the plan visual if needed.**

Attend – be vigilant to the child's emotional state and give more time if they need it so that they feel nurtured and safe. **Give reassurance and a transitional object for younger children.**

Yourself – look after yourself and make sure that you are regulated and feel calm yourself. Engage in some relaxation and take time out after the bedtime routine for you to build up your own resources and **remember that it is ok to feel worried but don't let it overwhelm you.**

Monday morning plan



Manage – manage yourself
FIRST! This is not selfish. This is not selfish. You cannot support a child or young person who is unregulated and stressed if you are too. Take time to sort your own needs and then manage your emotional state by using your usual stress management tools e.g. **grounding/time alone/Mindfulness etc.**

Organise – get everything ready (*by getting up earlier*) so the bags are in the hallway, the breakfast is set up and you own things for work/whatever you need are all organised. **This means that you can attend to the child and do so in a regulated manner.**

Neutralise – spend some time with your child talking through any worries and again **helping them to see a solution/where they are catastrophising** and show them the evidence against any **irrational thoughts/thinking patterns.**

Decide – this is the plan – make it clear to them that you have a plan to get to school, how you will get here, what music you might listen to **in the car/stories you might tell to each other on the bus/as you walk/who else might be with you etc** so that it all becomes clear and they feel prepared for each step.

Accept – accept the child's emotional state and give them reassurance that you love and care for them so that they feel nurtured and safe. Give reassurance and a transitional object for younger children. **It is okay to feel anxious, but we all need to manage it and I will help you. I am with you and will stay with you while you need me.**

Yourself – again look after yourself and make sure that you are regulated and feel calm yourself. Engage in some relaxation and remember that it is ok to feel worried but don't let it overwhelm you. **keep using the script – if I stay calm, I will make him/her feel safe.**



Tip 10

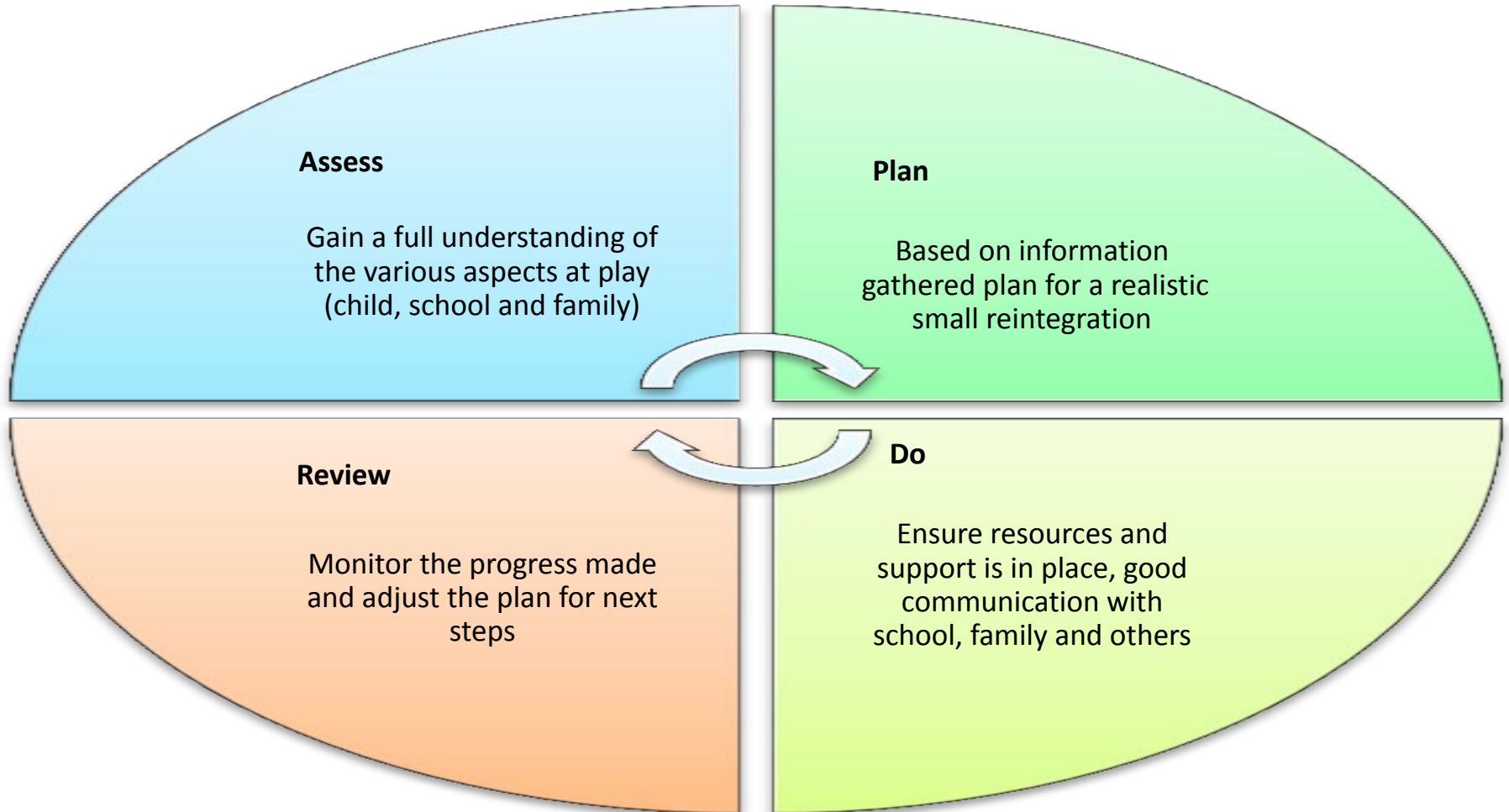
Celebrate
small
successes

The process

- Gather and analyse the evidence
- Develop a support plan



Gathering evidence



Analyse the data



Thambirajah et al. (2008) highlight the main aims of this analysis as follows:



To confirm that the child is displaying school phobia which is emotionally based as opposed to truancy or parentally condoned absence



To assess the extent and severity of (a) a school absence, (b) anxiety and (c) ascertain the types of anxiety



To gather information regarding the various child, family and school factors that may be contributing to or maintaining the behaviours



To synthesise the available information to develop a practical working hypothesis to then inform the planning of an effective intervention for the child.



Discuss with the young person

- Include the young person
- Step by step
- Hierarchy
- Life graph
- Thermometer etc



Develop a support plan in 10 Steps

10 Steps

- **1. Clarify whether this is school refusal or truanting**





10 steps

- **2. Complete a comprehensive assessment**



**10
steps**

- 3. Consider using a child specific rating scale**



**10
steps**

**•4. Enquire about
possible triggers**



**10
steps**

- 5. Rule out an underlying physical illness**

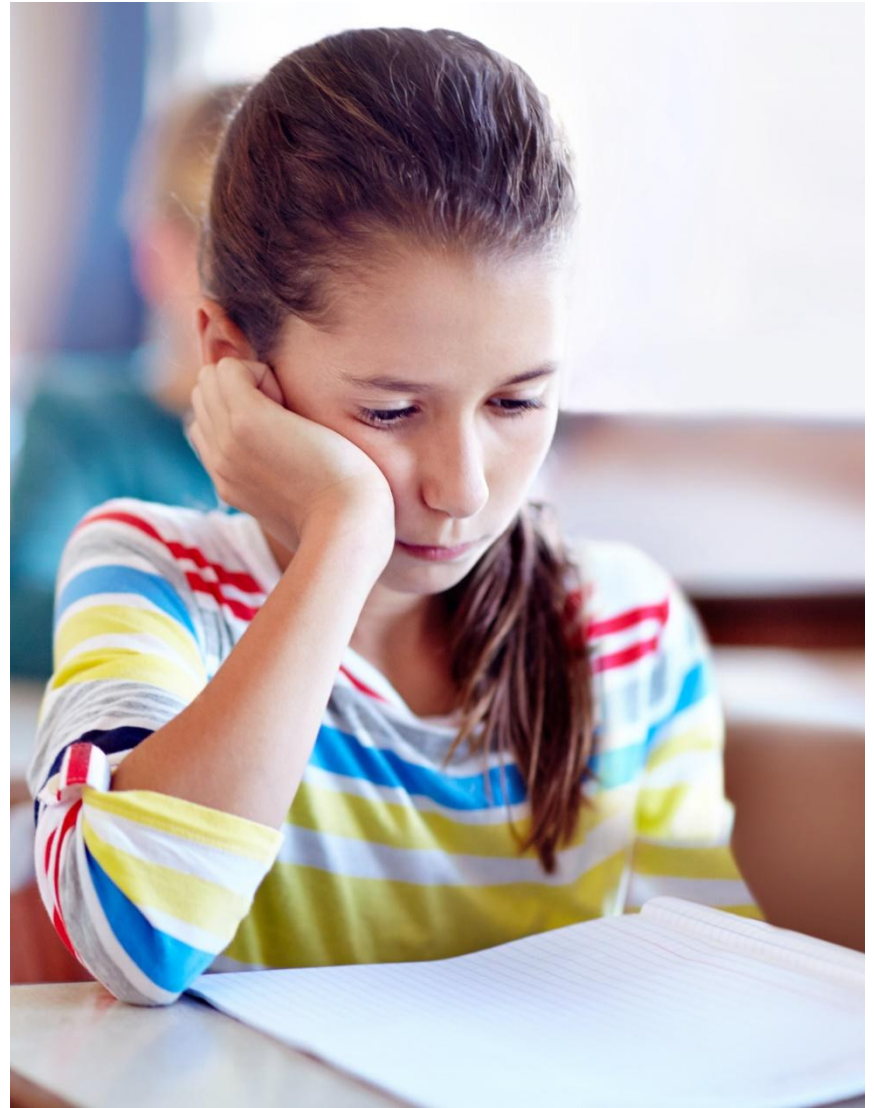
10 steps

- **6. Consider factors within school that may be contributing**



10 steps

- **7. Is there an underlying psychiatric disorder?**



10 steps

- **8. Assess whether parents are contributing to the problem**



10 steps


- 9. Give parents advice on supporting their child



10 steps

- **10. Refer to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) if psychological issues are present**





Doing what works: Gradual Exposure

One Step at a Time:

- Allow parent to attend, then slowly phase out parent. Attend to parental anxiety!
- Allow “visit” to the school when students are there, if needed with the parent.
- Allow partial attendance, then step it up.

Avoid “Flooding” - too much too soon – as this will only reinforce school phobia/avoidance.

Resilience
is key

Building Resilience

Alongside identifying and screening for risk factors, when working with individual young people it is really important to also identify and build areas of strength or resilience of the child, family and school which may help to 'protect' the child and promote school attendance.

The Importance of Language

The message has to be clear:



We do not blame you and we understand that you may be stressed.
We want to hear about your experience on your terms.

Language matters: Do I contribute to a sense of safety
with the words I use?

A reminder
All
resources
can be
accessed in
this
publication

Understanding & Supporting Children & Young People with Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA)

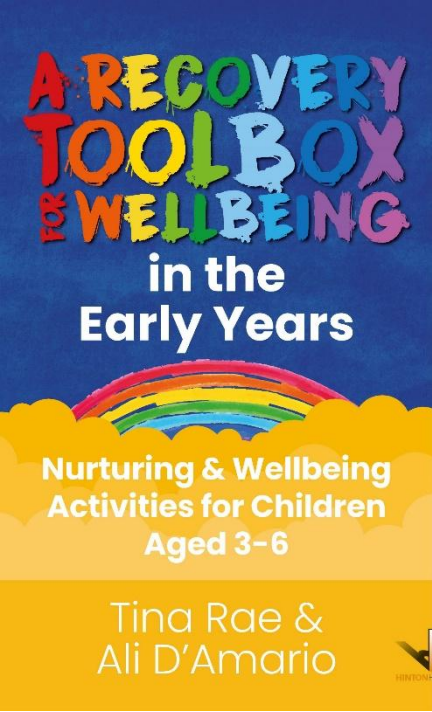
To summarise

- Assess holistically – use the data to reveal trends and issues
- Safety first
- Connections and welcomes
- Key adult but also Trauma sensitive adults and systems – ‘attendance is *everyone’s* responsibility’
- Bespoke and child centered
- Step by step with compassion
- Building the plan together – the Team approach
- Listen and promote hope and that sense of *belonging*

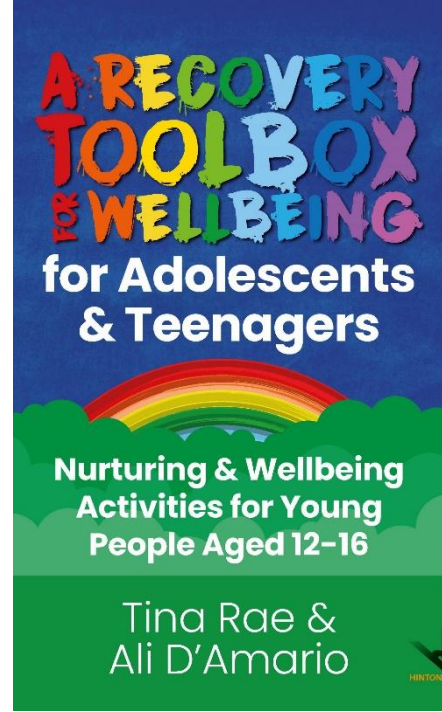


Useful links

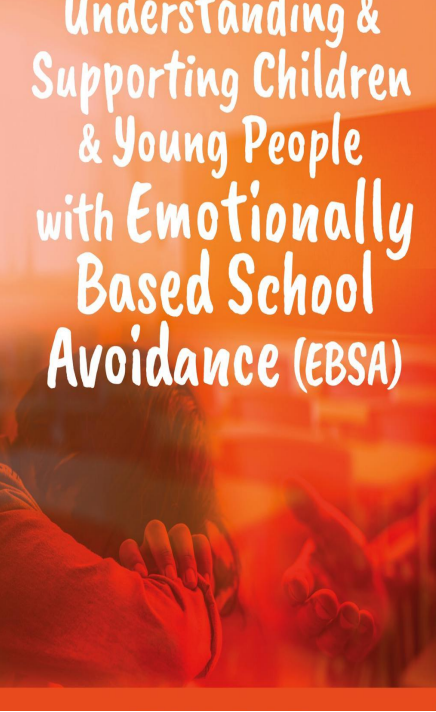
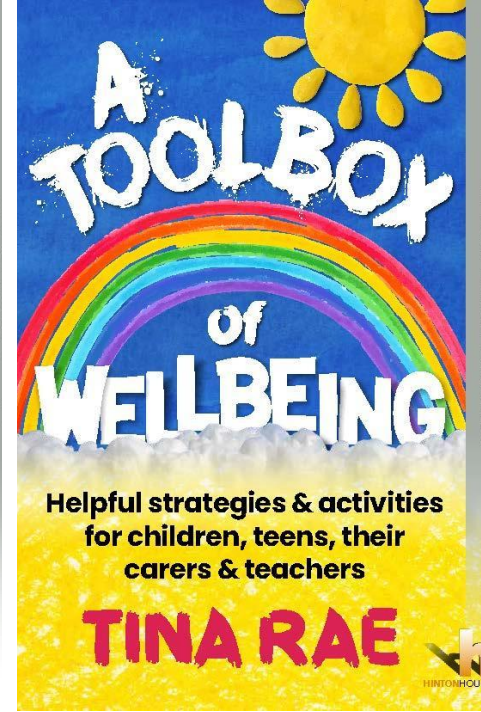
- **Hands On Scotland** is a great resource on this subject
<http://handsonscotland.co.uk/>
- **Young Minds** gives free, relevant, practical information about a range of mental health issues in children and young people. It has information about feelings and symptoms, conditions and looking after yourself. It also has some specific information about self-harm and what to do about self-harm.
<http://www.youngminds.org.uk/>
- **Minded** is a free educational resource on children and young people's mental health for adults, but can also be really useful for teenagers. It covers a wide range of topics including school refusal.
<http://www.minded.org.uk/>
- **Relate** gives specific advice for different types of worries and problems aimed at young people including school refusal.
<https://www.relate.org.uk/relationship-help/help-children-and-young-people>



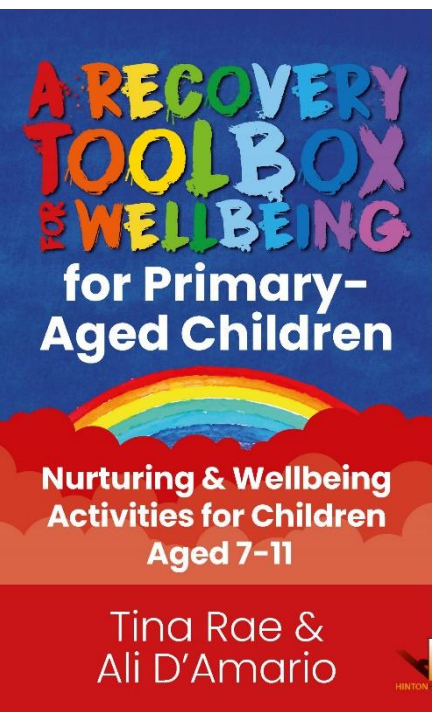
HINTON HOUSE Essentials



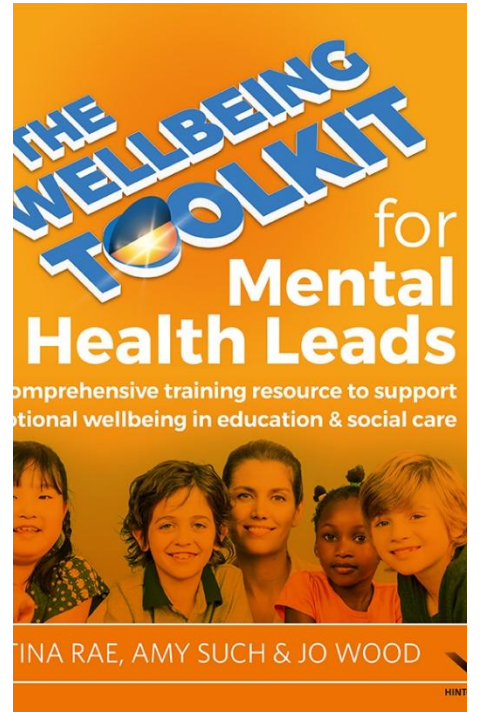
HINTON HOUSE Essentials



HINTON HOUSE Practical Resources



HINTON HOUSE Essentials



- **THANK YOU FOR LISTENING**

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