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When School Feels Unsafe: A Narrative Literature Review of Emotion Based School Avoidance

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Abstract

This study explores emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA) through a contemporary synthesis of psychological, relational, and neurodiversity-informed perspectives, with particular emphasis on how emotional distress, environmental mismatch, and interpersonal processes contribute to attendance difficulties. EBSA is traditionally conceptualised within anxiety-based frameworks; however, recent literature suggests a more complex aetiology involving emotion regulation difficulties, sensory processing differences, social experiences, and school contextual factors. This review critically examines these developments and considers their implications for formulation and intervention.

Findings from recent qualitative and quantitative research indicate that young people experiencing EBSA frequently report heightened emotional distress in relation to school attendance, including anxiety, shame, and feelings of overwhelm. These experiences are often compounded by perceived social evaluation, difficulties with peer relationships, and a lack of belonging within school environments. For neurodivergent students, including autistic young people and those with ADHD, additional factors such as sensory overload, executive functioning demands, and challenges navigating unpredictable routines further contribute to distress and avoidance behaviours. Across studies, school avoidance is increasingly understood not simply as refusal, but as an adaptive response to environments experienced as emotionally or cognitively overwhelming.

The literature further highlights the importance of relational factors in both the development and maintenance of EBSA. Supportive relationships with trusted adults, characterised by empathy, consistency, and emotional attunement, are consistently associated with improved engagement and successful reintegration into education. Conversely, experiences of misunderstanding, exclusion, or punitive responses may exacerbate distress and reinforce avoidance patterns. These findings align with ecological and attachment-informed frameworks that emphasise the importance of safety, belonging, and person–environment fit.

Overall, the evidence suggests that EBSA is best understood through an integrative formulation that incorporates emotional regulation processes, neurodevelopmental differences, relational experiences, and environmental demands. This synthesis challenges reductionist models focused solely on individual pathology and supports the development of multi-level interventions that prioritise emotional safety, relational connection, and school-based adaptation. Such approaches may provide a more

effective and compassionate foundation for supporting young people experiencing attendance difficulties.

Declaration and Statements

Declaration

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

Signed: *Cornelia Roth* (candidate)

Date: 30/06/2026

STATEMENT 1

This dissertation is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of MA Psychotherapeutic Practice: Humanistic

Signed: *Cornelia Roth* (candidate)

Date: 30/06/2026

STATEMENT 2

This dissertation is the result of my own independent work / investigation, except where otherwise stated.

Other sources are acknowledged by in-text citations giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

Signed: *Cornelia Roth* (candidate)

Date: 30/06/2026

STATEMENT 3

I hereby give consent for my dissertation, if accepted, to be available for photocopying and for inter-library loan, and for the title and summary to be made available to outside organisations.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

School attendance has long been considered as an essential foundation for educational attainment, social development, and long-term life outcomes. Statistic of the Department of Education (2025) clearly show a link between school attendance and future earnings, demonstrating that students in secondary school who are persistently absent may earn up to £10,000 less by age 28 than those with nearly perfect attendance. However, increasing attention is drawn to a small group of pupils for whom school attendance is connected to significant emotional distress, these children often experience school as not safe.

Emotion-Based School Avoidance (EBSA), also referred to as school refusal, describes a young person's difficulty attending or remaining in school due to emotional distress associated with attendance (Heyne et al., 2019). Unlike truancy, EBSA is not characterised by deliberate absence without parental knowledge. Instead, young people experiencing EBSA often want to attend school but find it difficult because of feelings such as anxiety, fear, distress, or emotional overwhelm. A key feature of EBSA is that parents are aware of the child's absence and typically make reasonable efforts to encourage school attendance. In addition, there is generally no significant antisocial or conduct-related behaviour associated with the absence (Heyne et al., 2019). These characteristics distinguish EBSA from other forms of non-attendance and highlight the importance of understanding the emotional factors underlying school avoidance.

School non-attendance is a complex and multifaceted issue that varies considerably between young people, making it difficult to establish a single, universally accepted definition (Heyne et al., 2019). Nevertheless, attendance difficulties are increasingly recognised as a significant concern. In England, approximately 18% of pupils were classified as persistently absent during the 2024/25 academic year, meaning they missed at least 10% of school sessions (Department for Education, 2026). Persistent absence can have significant long-term consequences, affecting not only academic achievement but also social development, emotional wellbeing, and future life opportunities. These impacts highlight the importance of understanding and addressing the factors that contribute to school non-attendance.

School non-attendance is a complex issue with no single clear cause and is not strongly linked to factors like gender or socioeconomic status. However, it tends to become more common during key transition periods, such as starting school or moving from primary to secondary school (King and Bernstein, 2001)

However, it suggests that there has been minimal advancement in treating school refusal in this century, largely due to the complex and varied nature of the issue (Elliott and Place, 2019; Nwosu et al., 2023).Given the evolving nature of the field, there is a clear need to collate recent research to better understand EBSA and how it is currently understood and treated within psychotherapeutic practice. A narrative literature review is particularly well suited for this aim, as it allows for a flexible and integrative investigation of different perspectives and research findings. It enables a wider exploration of a complex phenomenon such as EBSA. This approach is especially valuable when addressing areas characterised by conceptual ambiguity and emerging evidence.

The present review therefore aims to examine contemporary literature on EBSA published within the past five years (2020–2025). It seeks to explore how EBSA is defined and understood, identify key emotional and psychological mechanisms underlying school avoidance, and evaluate the range of therapeutic interventions currently being applied. In doing so, the review will also consider the strengths and limitations of existing research, with particular attention to gaps in knowledge and areas requiring further investigation.

The primary research question guiding this review is: How is emotion-based school avoidance conceptualised, maintained, and treated within contemporary psychotherapeutic literature, and what implications emerge for psychotherapeutic practice?

This literature review aims to contribute to a better understanding of EBSA. Improving clarity of the concept of EBSA and identifying effective therapeutic approaches in order to support better outcomes for children and adolescents experiencing barriers to school attendance, as well as for the families and professionals working with them.

Chapter 2: Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodology adopted for this dissertation. A narrative literature review approach has been selected to examine and synthesise existing research on EBSA. According to Aveyard (2019), a narrative literature review allows for the exploration and synthesis of a broad range of literature, facilitating the identification of key themes, concepts and debates and providing a comprehensive understanding of the subject area. This chapter explains the search strategy, inclusion and exclusion criteria, literature selection process, and method of analysis used.

This research project employed a narrative literature review methodology. Aveyard (2019) explains that a narrative literature review enables researchers to explore, interpret and synthesise existing knowledge, allowing for the identification of key themes, concepts and gaps within the literature. This approach was considered appropriate as the aim of this dissertation is to explore and critically evaluate the current body of knowledge regarding emotion-based school avoidance.

The search strategy

The literature search was conducted using the University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD) Library, with the primary searches undertaken through the EBSCOhost databases. Additional searches were carried out using Google Scholar where appropriate to identify relevant peer-reviewed publications. Government websites, including the UK Department for Education, were also consulted to obtain current statistics and policy information relating to school attendance.

The search strategy included a combination of keywords and Boolean operators to identify relevant literature. The main search terms included "Emotionally Based School Avoidance", "school refusal", "school attendance difficulties", "anxiety and school attendance", "school avoidance interventions", and "school refusal behaviour". Search terms were combined using Boolean operators, for example, "Emotionally Based School Avoidance" OR "school refusal" and "school refusal" AND anxiety, to broaden or refine the search results where appropriate.

Inclusion and Exclusion criteria

Studies were included if they focused on Emotionally Based School Avoidance, school refusal, or school attendance difficulties in children and young people, generally between the ages of 6 and 15 years. Studies were also required to examine emotional or psychological factors associated with school avoidance, explore contributing factors, lived experiences, or interventions, be published in peer-reviewed academic journals, and be available in English.

Studies were excluded if they focused primarily on truancy, delinquent absenteeism, or attendance difficulties unrelated to emotional factors. Research involving adults or participants outside the selected age range was excluded, as were non-academic publications such as blogs, opinion pieces, magazine articles, and other sources lacking a clear research methodology. Studies that did not contribute directly to the understanding of EBSA were also excluded.

Following the database searches, titles and abstracts were screened for relevance. Full-text articles were then reviewed against the inclusion and exclusion criteria before being selected for inclusion in the literature review. Priority was given to recent publications where possible, although seminal papers were also included where they made an important theoretical contribution to the development of the field.

Ethical considerations and Limitations

Despite this dissertation relying on publicly available secondary sources, ethical approval has been requested and subsequently permitted by UWTSD. Although, the narrative literature review approach allows for a thorough exploration of the literature, it is subject to potential selection bias due to the absence of a fully systematic search process. Furthermore, restricting research to the English language could ignore relevant international research.

Researcher Reflexivity

The researcher acknowledges that personal experiences can influence the research process, including the selection, interpretation, and evaluation of literature. An interest in Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) has been informed not only by academic

and professional interests but also by personal experience as the parent of a young person who has experienced significant difficulties attending school following the transition to secondary education. This experience has provided insight into the emotional impact of school attendance difficulties on both young people and their families and has contributed to the researcher's interest in exploring psychotherapeutic approaches to supporting EBSA.

The researcher recognises that this personal connection has the potential to shape assumptions about the causes of EBSA and the effectiveness of particular interventions. There is an awareness that personal experience may increase sensitivity to literature emphasising emotional, relational, and systemic explanations of school attendance difficulties. Acknowledging this potential bias is an important aspect of reflexive practice and contributes to the transparency and credibility of the research.

To minimise the influence of personal assumptions, the researcher adopted a reflexive approach throughout the review. This involved engaging critically with a broad range of literature, including studies representing different theoretical perspectives and intervention approaches. Rather than seeking evidence that confirmed personal experiences, the researcher aimed to evaluate the strengths, limitations, and quality of the available evidence, while recognising that EBSA is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon with no single explanatory model.

Consistent with psychotherapeutic practice, reflexivity has been viewed as an ongoing process of self-awareness and critical reflection. Throughout the dissertation, the researcher remained mindful of the distinction between personal experience and empirical evidence and sought to ensure that interpretations and conclusions were grounded in the research literature rather than individual experience. Through regular reflection and critical engagement with the evidence, the researcher aimed to maintain an open and balanced perspective, recognising that each young person's experience of EBSA is unique and influenced by a range of individual, relational, and contextual factors.

Research Paradigm

This dissertation is based on an interpretivist research paradigm. Interpretivism is concerned with understanding how people make sense of their experiences and recognises that there may be more than one way of understanding a particular issue (Crotty, 1998). This is appropriate for this study because EBSA is a complex issue that is experienced differently by each young person and understood in different ways by families, schools, and professionals.

The ontological position of this study is that there is no single reality or explanation for EBSA. Instead, each person's experiences and perspectives contribute to understanding the issue. This means that a young person, parent, teacher, and therapist may all have different but equally valuable views about why school attendance has become difficult.

The epistemological position is that knowledge is gained by exploring and interpreting these different perspectives rather than looking for one objective truth. As this study uses a narrative literature review, it brings together and critically examines existing research to develop a broader understanding of EBSA. This approach fits well with person-centred principles, which value the individual's unique experiences and recognise that behaviour is best understood within the context of the person's life rather than through diagnosis alone.

Chapter 3: Conceptualisation of EBSA

Terminology and Diagnosis

Due to the complex and heterogeneous nature of school non-attendance, reaching an agreement on a single definition has been challenging (Heyne et al., 2019). Terms such as school refusal, school phobia, and truancy have often been used interchangeably, despite referring to different underlying reasons for absence (Kearney, 2008).

More recent literature has increasingly adopted the term EBSA to describe school non-attendance associated with emotional difficulties (Chian et al., 2024). However, research with young people has indicated a preference for the term emotionally based

school non-attendance (EBSNA), as it is considered to better reflect lived experience (Corcoran and Kelly, 2023).

Both terms have been criticised for placing emphasis on difficulties located within the child. More recently, alternative terminology such as barriers to education has been introduced in Department for Education guidance (2026), while Hammond-Price et al. (2025) extend this to emotional barriers to school attendance. This framing describes attendance difficulties driven by intense and persistent emotional responses to school, often rooted in anxiety or fear, which can significantly impede or prevent attendance (Corcoran and Kelly, 2023).

For the purposes of this dissertation, the term EBSA will be used for consistency with the wider academic literature.

A further complexity is that EBSA is not recognised as a formal diagnosis in either the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5-TR) or the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) (Sahoo et al., 2023). Instead, school attendance difficulties are typically conceptualised as manifestations of underlying emotional, developmental, or environmental factors. Consequently, children presenting with similar attendance patterns may receive different diagnoses, including anxiety disorders, depression, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or trauma-related conditions.

This diagnostic ambiguity raises important questions about whether EBSA should be understood as a distinct phenomenon or as a behavioural expression of broader underlying difficulties. Increasingly, research has advocated for a shift away from purely categorical diagnostic frameworks towards formulation-based, person-centred approaches, which prioritise understanding the function and meaning of school avoidance within the context of a child's individual experiences, relationships, and environment.

This shift towards formulation-based approaches is closely aligned with person-centred principles, which emphasise understanding the unique experiences, strengths, and needs of each child rather than focusing solely on symptoms or diagnostic labels. From a person-centred perspective, EBSA is viewed as a meaningful response to an

individual's circumstances, recognising that emotional distress and school avoidance are influenced by the interaction between the child, their family, the school environment, and wider social factors. This approach encourages collaborative working with children, families, and professionals to develop an individualised understanding of the factors contributing to attendance difficulties and to identify appropriate, strengths-based interventions. As a result, person-centred practice has become increasingly influential in supporting children experiencing EBSA, promoting interventions that are responsive to the child's voice and lived experience rather than relying on standardised or diagnosis-led approaches (Corcoran and Kelly, 2023; Hammond-Price et al., 2025).

Theoretical Models

Cognitive- Behavioural Model

Cognitive-behavioural models are among the most widely used frameworks for understanding EBSA (Sahoo, et al., 2023). These approaches suggest that children avoid school because they see it as stressful or threatening. When attending school causes significant anxiety, staying at home brings immediate relief and reduces distress. Although this relief helps in the short term, it can reinforce the avoidance behaviour, making it more likely that the child will continue to avoid school in the future.

King et al. (2000) reviewed the evidence for cognitive-behavioural interventions for school refusal and concluded that CBT showed promise in improving school attendance and reducing anxiety. The authors identified exposure-based techniques and parental involvement as key components of effective intervention. However, they cautioned that the evidence base remained limited due to the small number of rigorous controlled studies and highlighted the need for further research. The review also emphasised the heterogeneous nature of school refusal, suggesting that interventions should be tailored to the individual needs of young people.

Sahoo et al. (2023) concluded that school refusal behaviour is a multifactorial phenomenon which is influenced by the individual, their family, and school-related factors. While cognitive-behavioural interventions demonstrated positive outcomes, the authors emphasised the importance of early intervention and multidisciplinary

approaches involving schools, families, and mental health professionals. The authors are moving beyond treating it as an anxiety disorder.

Attachment-Informed perspective

Attachment theory offers another useful perspective for understanding EBSA by focusing on the importance of relationships in shaping how young people experience safety and security in educational settings. From this perspective, school can be understood as an environment that has the potential to provide either a secure base or a source of stress, depending on the quality of relationships and the individual's experiences within it. Mandell (2024) suggests that school avoidance may develop when students experience a lack of emotional security in school and feel disconnected from the school community. In these circumstances, the school environment may be perceived as unsafe or overwhelming, which can increase anxiety and lead to avoidance behaviours as a protective response.

Mandell (2024) further argues that students who experience strong, supportive relationships with teachers, peers, and wider school staff are more likely to develop a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging is associated with greater emotional regulation and resilience, which may help students manage stressors such as academic pressure or social challenges. In contrast, where these supportive relationships are absent or inconsistent, students may be more vulnerable to feeling isolated, misunderstood, or unsupported, which can contribute to disengagement from school over time.

This perspective is particularly relevant to EBSA because it highlights that attendance difficulties may not simply reflect anxiety within the individual but may also be shaped by the quality of relational experiences within the school environment. It therefore shifts attention towards the interaction between the young person and their context, rather than locating the difficulty solely within the child. The study by Mandell (2024) also emphasises the importance of early identification and intervention, suggesting that strengthening relationships and monitoring emerging signs of disengagement may help prevent avoidance patterns from becoming more entrenched.

From a broader attachment-informed viewpoint, school attendance can be understood as being supported by the availability of consistent, trusting relationships that help young people regulate emotions and cope with challenge. Where these relationships are weak or disrupted, students may be more likely to rely on avoidance as a coping strategy. This aligns with wider EBSA literature that emphasises the role of emotional safety, trust, and connection in promoting engagement with education.

However, while attachment-based explanations provide valuable insight into the relational aspects of EBSA, they may not fully account for other contributing factors such as neurodevelopmental differences, sensory sensitivities, or systemic barriers within education. As a result, attachment theory is often most useful when integrated within broader formulation-based approaches that consider biological, psychological, and environmental influences together. This allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how and why school avoidance develops in different contexts.

Overall, an attachment-informed perspective contributes to a more relational understanding of EBSA by emphasising the importance of belonging, emotional safety, and consistent supportive relationships within schools. It reinforces the idea that school avoidance should not be understood purely as an individual problem, but as a response that develops within relational and environmental contexts over time.

Emotion regulation Models

In recent years, emotion-based school avoidance (EBSA) has increasingly been conceptualised as a response to difficulties in emotion regulation rather than an act of deliberate defiance or oppositional behaviour. Contemporary research suggests that children and adolescents experiencing EBSA often use school avoidance as a strategy to reduce or escape intense emotional distress associated with the school environment, including anxiety, fear, shame, or overwhelming stress (McDonald and Pervez, 2025).

From this perspective, avoidance functions as a negatively reinforced coping strategy. Although remaining away from school may provide immediate relief from emotional distress, this short-term reduction in anxiety can inadvertently maintain avoidance behaviour by limiting opportunities to develop more adaptive coping skills and gradually

tolerate difficult emotions. This cycle is consistent with contemporary cognitive-behavioural and emotion regulation frameworks that explain the persistence of anxiety-related avoidance (McDonald and Pervez, 2025).

Recent authors argue that difficulties identifying, understanding, and regulating emotions may increase vulnerability to EBSA. When young people experience emotional distress that exceeds their perceived coping capacity, attending school may become increasingly challenging, making avoidance a means of managing emotional discomfort rather than addressing its underlying causes (Chian, et al., 2024).

Furthermore, emotionally based school avoidance is associated not only with anxiety but also with broader difficulties in emotion regulation. Young people with school refusal behaviour often struggle to recognise, manage, and tolerate distressing emotions, and greater emotion regulation difficulties are associated with more severe anxiety and depressive symptoms (Yesilkaya et al., 2026). These findings suggest that interventions targeting emotion regulation skills, alongside anxiety, may help reduce school avoidance and improve engagement with education.

Consequently, recent evidence suggests that attendance difficulties should not be understood solely as a manifestation of anxiety disorders. Instead, they may reflect broader difficulties with emotion regulation, emotional resilience, and adaptive coping, highlighting the importance of psychotherapeutic interventions that strengthen emotional awareness, regulation skills, and psychological flexibility alongside supporting school reintegration (McDonald and Pervez, 2025).

However, it is important to notice that the study identifies associations, not causation. It cannot determine whether emotion regulation difficulties cause school refusal, whether school refusal increases emotional distress, or whether both are influenced by other factors such as anxiety, neurodevelopmental differences, bullying, or school experiences. Nevertheless, the findings provide strong support for viewing EBSA through an emotion-regulation and family-systems lens rather than solely as an attendance or anxiety problem.

Neurodevelopmental considerations

More recently, research is considering the relationship between EBSA and neurodevelopmental differences. Recent studies consistently report elevated rates of autism and ADHD among children experiencing attendance difficulties.

Munkhaugen et al. (2019) research demonstrate a strong overlap between autism and school attendance difficulties. In addition, anxiety, bullying, sensory sensitivities, and social challenges were frequently associated with attendance problems. The authors further argued that attendance difficulties should be understood within the context of autism-related needs rather than solely as anxiety disorders.

Contemporary neurodiversity-informed perspectives caution against locating these difficulties solely within the individual, arguing instead that attendance problems may arise when environmental demands exceed available coping resources. This view aligns with ecological models of school attendance, which emphasise the interaction between the young person and their educational environment (Melvin et al., 2019).

Melvin et al. (2019) proposed the KiTeS Framework, a bioecological model that conceptualises school attendance problems as the result of interactions between individual, family, school, community, and societal factors. The framework challenges explanations that locate attendance difficulties solely within the child and instead emphasises the importance of understanding attendance within its broader environmental context. This perspective aligns with contemporary approaches to EBSA that advocate relational, systemic, and strengths-based interventions.

Mandy et al. (2022) discussed "school distress" among autistic young people and argued that attendance difficulties often arise because school environments place sustained demands on sensory, social, and emotional systems.

This research is one reason many UK researchers are moving away from the term "school refusal" towards terms such as **s**chool distress or emotionally based school avoidance.

Comorbidities

Anxiety Disorders

Anxiety is the most consistently identified mental health difficulty associated with EBSA. Recent research suggests that many young people experiencing school attendance difficulties present with clinically significant symptoms of anxiety, including social anxiety, separation anxiety, generalised anxiety, and panic symptoms. A systematic review by Ulaş and Seçer (2024) found that anxiety-related difficulties were among the most frequently reported characteristics of school refusal behaviour, highlighting the central role of emotional distress in attendance difficulties. Anxiety may contribute to school avoidance through heightened perceptions of threat, fear of negative evaluation, and difficulties coping with uncertainty in the school environment.

Contemporary cognitive-behavioural models suggest that avoidance is maintained through negative reinforcement. When a young person remains at home, anxiety is reduced in the short term, increasing the likelihood of future avoidance. Recent intervention research supports this conceptualisation. In a systematic review and meta-analysis of cognitive behavioural interventions for school attendance problems, Jakobsen et al. (2025) found that anxiety was a key treatment target across studies, with interventions demonstrating improvements in both attendance and anxiety symptoms.

However, recent evidence suggests that anxiety should not be viewed as a singular explanation for EBSA. School attendance difficulties often emerge through interactions between anxiety, environmental stressors, family factors, and emotional regulation difficulties. Chen et al. (2024) found that adolescent anxiety, parental anxiety, and emotion dysregulation were all associated with increased school refusal behaviours, suggesting that attendance difficulties are embedded within broader emotional and relational contexts.

Depression

Depression is another commonly reported comorbidity among young people experiencing school attendance difficulties. Symptoms such as low mood, fatigue, reduced motivation, hopelessness, and social withdrawal can significantly impair a

young person's capacity to engage with the cognitive, social, and emotional demands of school. In this context, school attendance may become increasingly difficult not only because of anxiety-related avoidance but also due to reduced energy, diminished reward sensitivity, and a lack of perceived purpose or hopefulness about school engagement.

Research suggests that the relationship between depression and school non-attendance is likely to be bidirectional. Depression may contribute to attendance difficulties by reducing motivation, increasing withdrawal, and lowering a young person's perceived ability to cope with school demands. Conversely, prolonged absence from school may further reinforce depressive symptoms by limiting access to peer relationships, routine, achievement experiences, and positive reinforcement, thereby increasing isolation and reducing opportunities for social connection. Over time, this can create a reinforcing cycle in which depression and non-attendance maintain and intensify one another.

Jakobsen et al. (2025), in a recent meta-analysis, found that young people experiencing school attendance problems frequently report elevated levels of depressive symptoms alongside anxiety. Importantly, their findings suggest that interventions targeting school attendance difficulties are often associated with improvements in emotional wellbeing, including reductions in depressive symptomatology. This indicates that school engagement and mental health outcomes are closely interconnected, rather than being separate domains requiring independent intervention.

Similarly, Chen et al. (2024) identified both adolescent and parental depression as significant factors associated with school refusal behaviours. This highlights the importance of considering the broader emotional and familial context in which attendance difficulties develop and are maintained. Parental depression may influence family functioning, emotional availability, and the consistency of support provided to the young person, all of which can indirectly affect school engagement.

Taken together, these findings support the need for comprehensive assessment and intervention approaches that consider emotional wellbeing alongside attendance patterns. Rather than focusing solely on physical presence in school, effective practice may require attention to underlying depressive symptoms, family emotional functioning,

and the broader psychosocial context in which school avoidance occurs. This aligns with contemporary EBSA frameworks that emphasise the importance of understanding attendance difficulties as part of a wider emotional and relational system rather than as an isolated behavioural issue.

Trauma-Related Presentations

More recently, researchers have begun to explore the relationship between trauma and school attendance difficulties. Trauma-informed perspectives suggest that school avoidance may function as an adaptive response to perceived threat rather than an act of defiance or non-compliance. Experiences such as bullying, bereavement, family conflict, abuse, neglect, or adverse childhood experiences may contribute to heightened threat sensitivity and difficulties feeling safe within school environments.

Recent evidence supports this perspective. Wang and Qin (2025) found that both anxiety and trauma significantly predicted school avoidance behaviours, with trauma exerting both direct and indirect effects through heightened emotional distress. Their findings suggest that experiences of adversity may shape how young people perceive and respond to school environments, increasing the likelihood of avoidance when school is experienced as unsafe or overwhelming.

In addition, recent UK reviews of EBSA have highlighted increasing recognition of trauma-informed approaches within educational practice. McDonald and Pervez (2025) argue that emotionally based school avoidance is best understood through collaborative, systemic approaches that recognise the influence of emotional distress, relational experiences, and environmental factors rather than focusing solely on individual pathology.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that anxiety, depression, and trauma-related difficulties are highly prevalent among young people experiencing EBSA. However, contemporary research increasingly emphasises that these comorbidities should not be viewed as isolated causes of school avoidance. Instead, they interact with family relationships, school experiences, emotional regulation processes, and environmental factors to shape how young people experience school and whether it is perceived as a place of safety or threat. This supports a formulation-based understanding of EBSA that

moves beyond diagnostic labels to explore the unique meaning and function of attendance difficulties for everyone.

Lester and Michelson (2024) argue that many young people returning to school following the COVID-19 pandemic experienced heightened perceptions of threat, uncertainty, and emotional distress. These findings support trauma-informed approaches, which emphasise understanding school avoidance as a response to perceived emotional threat rather than deliberate non-compliance. Consequently, interventions should prioritise psychological safety, trusting relationships, and gradual re-engagement rather than attendance enforcement alone.

Chapter 4: Underlying Mechanisms of Emotion-Based School Avoidance

While Emotion-Based School Avoidance (EBSA) is frequently associated with anxiety, depression, neurodevelopmental differences, and trauma-related difficulties, these factors alone do not explain why some young people become unable to attend school. A formulation-based perspective suggests that attendance difficulties emerge through the interaction of multiple psychological, relational, and environmental processes. Understanding these underlying mechanisms is important because it shifts attention away from attendance as a behavioural outcome and towards the emotional experiences that give rise to avoidance.

This chapter explores the key mechanisms that have been identified within recent literature, including threat perception, avoidance and reinforcement processes, emotional regulation difficulties, attachment and relational factors, neurobiological responses to stress, and the role of belonging and psychological safety. Together, these mechanisms help explain how school can become experienced as a place of distress and why avoidance may become increasingly difficult to overcome over time.

Thread Perception and Feeling unsafe

Recent qualitative research suggests that young people experiencing EBSA frequently describe school as emotionally overwhelming and psychologically unsafe. Enderle et al.

(2025) found that students reported feelings of anxiety, social pressure, fear of judgement, and difficulties managing the demands of the school environment. Similarly, McDonald and Pervez's (2025) systematic review identified emotional distress, feelings of unsafety, and unmet psychological needs as recurring themes across studies of EBSA. These findings support the argument that attendance difficulties may arise when school is perceived as a source of threat rather than safety.

Avoidance and Negative Reinforcement new

A central principle of contemporary cognitive-behavioural models is that avoidance contributes to the maintenance of anxiety rather than its resolution. When an individual avoids a situation they perceive as threatening, the immediate reduction in emotional distress functions as negative reinforcement, increasing the likelihood that avoidance will be repeated in future encounters. Although avoidance provides temporary relief, it limits opportunities to test threat-related beliefs, develop coping skills, and learn that feared outcomes are either unlikely to occur or can be successfully managed. Consequently, avoidance prevents corrective learning and reinforces perceptions of threat, contributing to a self-perpetuating cycle of anxiety and withdrawal (Brown et al., 2023).

This process is particularly relevant to school attendance difficulties. If school is repeatedly experienced as a source of emotional distress, students may begin to associate attendance with threat. Avoiding school can temporarily reduce anxiety, reinforcing non-attendance as a coping strategy. Consequently, school avoidance may function less as an indicator of disengagement from learning and more as an attempt to regulate overwhelming emotional states. Contemporary research on EBSA frequently conceptualises attendance difficulties in these terms, viewing non-attendance as a protective response to perceived social, academic, or emotional threat rather than deliberate non-compliance (Heyne et al., 2019).

Recent qualitative studies of school attendance problems support these theoretical explanations. Students frequently describe feeling overwhelmed, emotionally exhausted, fearful of judgement, and disconnected from peers and staff (Enderle et al., 2025). These experiences can be understood through the lens of threat appraisal, whereby school

environments become associated with anticipated emotional harm. From this perspective, effective interventions are likely to involve not only improving attendance but also reducing perceived threat, strengthening feelings of safety and belonging, and helping students develop more adaptive coping strategies and beliefs about their ability to manage school-related challenges.

Cognitive-behavioural explanations remain highly influential in understanding school attendance difficulties. Avoidance is maintained through negative reinforcement, whereby remaining at home results in immediate reductions in anxiety and distress. Ulaş and Seçer's (2024) systematic review identified anxiety reduction as a central maintaining factor across school refusal studies Jakobsen et al. (2025) found that when interventions helped students gradually reduce avoidance behaviours, attendance often improved. This supports the idea that avoiding difficult situations can bring immediate relief from anxiety or distress but may also prevent students from developing confidence and coping skills, making future attendance more challenging.

Emotion RegulationDifficulties

Di Vincenzo et al. (2024) note that emotional difficulties extend beyond anxiety disorders and include broader challenges in coping with distress, regulating emotions, and managing interpersonal stressors. Chen et al. (2024) found that emotion dysregulation was significantly associated with school refusal behaviours, even when controlling for anxiety and depression. Their findings suggest that difficulties managing emotional responses may contribute directly to attendance difficulties. Furthermore, recent conceptual work has proposed that school avoidance may function as an adaptive strategy to reduce overwhelming emotional experiences when alternative regulation strategies are unavailable.

This perspective is particularly relevant for psychotherapy as it reframes avoidance as a coping mechanism rather than a behavioural problem. From this viewpoint, intervention involves supporting emotional awareness, regulation skills, and tolerance of distress rather than solely increasing attendance.

Shame and Social-Evaluative Threat

Although anxiety remains the dominant explanatory framework for EBSA, emerging evidence suggests that shame-related processes may also be relevant. Students experiencing attendance difficulties frequently report fears of judgement, embarrassment, social exclusion, and being perceived as different from their peers (Enderle et al., 2025). These experiences closely resemble the social-evaluative concerns associated with shame, which has been linked to avoidance, withdrawal, and difficulties engaging in valued activities (Gilbert, 2020). Consequently, shame may represent an important but underexplored factor in understanding school attendance difficulties.

Gilbert's (2020) compassion-focused framework provides a useful lens through which to understand these experiences. According to this perspective, shame activates threat-based emotional systems that promote withdrawal and avoidance. Consequently, school avoidance may represent an attempt to protect the self from anticipated experiences of failure, criticism, or rejection.

Belonging and Relational Safety

Attachment-informed perspectives suggest that relationships play a central role in experiences of safety, belonging, and engagement. Consistent with this view, recent research highlights the importance of positive relationships in supporting school attendance. Students experiencing EBSA frequently report feeling misunderstood, isolated, or disconnected from peers and school staff (Enderle et al., 2025). Qualitative studies have found that a lack of belonging, difficulties in peer relationships, and negative interactions with teachers can contribute to attendance difficulties, while supportive relationships with trusted adults are often identified as key factors in successful re-engagement with education (Enderle et al., 2025). More broadly, research on school belonging suggests that feeling accepted, valued, and connected within the school community is associated with improved attendance, wellbeing, and engagement (Allen et al., 2021; Korpershoek et al., 2020).

McDonald and Pervez (2025) found that collaborative, relationship-based approaches were a common feature of successful school-supported interventions. Similarly, Hammond-Price et al. (2025) reported that UK local authority guidance increasingly emphasises relational and systemic approaches when supporting children experiencing EBSA. These findings suggest that fostering connection and belonging may be as important as addressing individual symptoms.

The Body's Threat Response

Recent trauma-informed approaches have drawn attention to the neurobiological effects of chronic stress and perceived threat. When individuals experience situations as threatening, activation of the autonomic nervous system can trigger physiological responses including increased heart rate, nausea, headaches, stomach pain, fatigue, and panic-like symptoms (Porges, 2022). These responses reflect the body's adaptive threat-response systems, which are designed to promote survival but may become activated in non-dangerous situations when individuals experience ongoing stress or anxiety. Such physical symptoms are commonly reported among young people experiencing emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA), with studies identifying somatic complaints, anxiety-related physical distress, and emotional overwhelm as frequent barriers to school attendance (Heyne et al., 2019; Di Vincenzo et al., 2024; Enderle et al., 2025).

Polyvagal-informed perspectives propose that perceived threat can trigger defensive responses such as fight, flight, or shutdown, reducing an individual's capacity for learning and social engagement. From this perspective, school avoidance may not simply reflect unwillingness to attend but rather a physiological response to environments experienced as unsafe. Recent research examining anxiety and trauma in school avoidance found that both factors significantly predicted attendance difficulties, supporting the relevance of trauma-informed conceptualisations.

An Integrative View

Contemporary literature increasingly suggests that no single mechanism can adequately explain EBSA. Instead, attendance difficulties emerge through interactions between

emotional vulnerabilities, relational experiences, neurodevelopmental differences, and environmental stressors. This position is reflected within Melvin et al.'s (2019) KiTeS Framework, which conceptualises school attendance difficulties as arising from interactions between the child, family, school, community, and wider societal systems.

Recent analyses of UK local authority guidance similarly highlight the importance of contextual and systemic factors in understanding EBSA (Hammond-Price et al., 2025). Rather than locating the difficulty solely within the child, these approaches emphasise how experiences of threat, dysregulation, exclusion, and unmet need interact over time to influence attendance. A formulation-based understanding therefore enables practitioners to move beyond diagnostic labels and develop a more holistic understanding of why school may come to feel unsafe for some children and young people.

Chapter 5: Psychotherapeutic Interventions

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) remains the most extensively researched intervention for school attendance difficulties. CBT conceptualises EBSA as being maintained through interactions between thoughts, emotions, physiological responses, and behaviours. According to this perspective, school avoidance persists because avoiding school reduces anxiety in the short term, reinforcing avoidance patterns over time (Jakobsen et al. 2025).

Jakobsen et al. (2025) conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis of cognitive behavioural interventions for school attendance problems. Across 15 studies involving 932 young people, CBT interventions were associated with improvements in school attendance and reductions in anxiety and depressive symptoms. However, the authors noted considerable methodological limitations and heterogeneity between studies, highlighting the need for further high-quality research.

Despite its strong evidence base, CBT has been criticised for placing primary emphasis on individual psychological processes. Critics argue that attendance difficulties are

often influenced by broader relational, educational, and systemic factors that may not be adequately addressed through individual therapy alone. Recent research has increasingly highlighted the importance of school climate, peer relationships, belonging, and environmental accommodations in supporting attendance. McDonald and Pervez (2025), in their systematic review of school-partnered approaches to EBSA, found that successful interventions often involved collaboration between schools, families, and mental health professionals rather than relying solely on individual therapeutic work. Their findings suggest that while CBT may be effective in reducing anxiety, it is often most beneficial when delivered as part of a wider, multi-systemic intervention.

From a psychotherapeutic perspective, these findings suggest that CBT offers valuable tools for addressing the cognitive and behavioural processes associated with EBSA, particularly anxiety and avoidance. However, contemporary understandings increasingly emphasise the need to integrate CBT within broader formulation-based approaches that also consider emotional regulation, attachment relationships, neurodevelopmental differences, and environmental factors. Consequently, CBT may be best understood not as a standalone solution, but as one component of a comprehensive intervention aimed at helping young people experience school as a safer and more manageable environment.

While these techniques have demonstrated effectiveness in reducing anxiety and supporting school re-engagement, critics argue that they may place emphasis on changing the young person's responses to school without adequately addressing the contextual factors that contribute to distress. Consequently, there is increasing recognition that CBT interventions should be integrated with relational, systemic, and school-based approaches to ensure that the environments young people are returning to are experienced as safe and supportive (McDonald and Pervez, 2025).

Attachment-Informed Approaches

Attachment-informed approaches conceptualise EBSA as emerging, at least in part, from difficulties relating to safety, security, and emotional regulation. Drawing upon the work of Bowlby (1988), these approaches emphasise the importance of supportive relationships in fostering resilience and reducing distress.

Korpershoek et al. (2020) found that secondary school students who experience a strong sense of belonging—feeling accepted, valued, respected, and connected within their school community—tend to show higher levels of motivation, engagement, self-esteem, and wellbeing, are less likely to disengage from school through absenteeism or dropout, and generally achieve better academic outcomes than students with weaker feelings of belonging.

Halligan and Cryer (2022) interviewed students attending a specialist provision for young people with EBSA. Participants emphasised the importance of being understood both emotionally and academically and described positive relationships with adults as a key factor in re-engagement. The authors concluded that students valued environments where they felt understood, valued, and psychologically safe, suggesting that experiences of misunderstanding and relational disconnection may contribute to attendance difficulties.

An attachment perspective encourages therapists to ask not only "What is this behaviour?" but also "What need is this behaviour communicating?" This shift from behaviour management to meaning-making reflects broader developments within contemporary psychotherapy.

Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan, 2000) suggests that people are more motivated and experience better wellbeing when they feel connected to others, capable of meeting challenges, and able to make choices about their lives. For young people experiencing EBSA, feeling disconnected from others, lacking control, or doubting their ability to cope with school may make it harder to engage with education. In contrast, supportive and understanding relationships can help students feel connected and valued, which may encourage them to re-engage with school.

Emotion Regulation Approaches

Chen et al. (2024) identified emotion dysregulation as a significant predictor of school refusal behaviour, suggesting that difficulties recognising, understanding, and managing emotions may play an important role in the development and maintenance of attendance difficulties. Young people who struggle to regulate feelings such as anxiety, distress, or overwhelm may be more likely to avoid school as a way of coping with these

emotional experiences. These findings support the rationale for interventions that focus on strengthening emotional awareness and regulation skills, rather than addressing attendance solely as a behavioural issue. From this perspective, improving attendance may require helping young people understand and manage the emotions that underlie school avoidance, alongside efforts to support school re-engagement.

Compassion-focused approaches

Compassion-focused approaches may be particularly relevant where shame and self-criticism contribute to school avoidance. Gilbert (2020) argues that compassionate responding can help reduce threat-system activation and promote emotional safety. Within the context of EBSA, many young people experience school as a source of significant emotional threat, characterised by fears of failure, social judgement, or not meeting expectations. These experiences may trigger heightened anxiety and self-critical thinking, reinforcing avoidance as a means of reducing distress. Compassion-focused approaches aim to help individuals develop a kinder and more understanding relationship with themselves, reducing shame and increasing their capacity to tolerate difficult emotions. By strengthening self-compassion, young people may become better able to manage the emotional challenges associated with school attendance, reducing the need for avoidance as a coping strategy.

Emerging evidence suggests that self-compassion is associated with lower levels of anxiety, depression, and psychological distress among adolescents. For example, Bluth and Blanton (2015) found that self-compassion was linked to greater emotional wellbeing and lower perceived stress in adolescents. Similarly, Neff and McGehee (2010) reported that self-compassion was associated with lower anxiety and depression and greater resilience in young people. These findings suggest that cultivating self-compassion may help adolescents respond more adaptively to the emotional demands of school.

This research has further demonstrated that self-compassion is positively associated with emotion regulation abilities. Adolescents with higher levels of self-compassion tend to show greater emotional resilience and are less likely to engage in avoidant coping strategies when faced with stress. Given evidence linking emotion dysregulation to

school refusal behaviour (e.g., Chen et al., 2024), compassion-focused interventions may offer a useful means of addressing one of the underlying mechanisms associated with EBSA.

Despite its theoretical relevance, direct evidence for compassion-focused interventions in EBSA remains limited. Much of the existing literature has examined self-compassion in relation to anxiety, depression, and wellbeing rather than school attendance specifically. Consequently, further research is needed to evaluate whether compassion-focused approaches can improve attendance outcomes among young people experiencing EBSA. Future studies could explore whether reductions in shame, self-criticism, and threat responses mediate improvements in school engagement and attendance. Longitudinal and intervention-based research would be particularly valuable in clarifying the role of compassion-focused approaches within multi-component EBSA support programmes.

From a person-centred perspective, shame is understood as developing when individuals experience acceptance as conditional or feel that aspects of themselves are unacceptable. Carl Rogers (1957, 1961) proposed that psychological growth occurs within relationships characterised by empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard. Within such relationships, clients are able to explore painful emotions without fear of judgement, gradually developing greater self-acceptance and reducing feelings of shame. This emphasis on relational safety is particularly relevant to emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA), where many young people report feeling misunderstood, judged, or different within educational settings (Enderle et al., 2025).

Neurodiversity-Affirming Approaches new

Prosser and Birchwood (2024) found that EBSA in autistic young people is influenced by a combination of anxiety, sensory sensitivities, social challenges, and school environmental factors. Students frequently reported finding school overwhelming due to noise, crowds, unpredictable routines, and difficulties navigating peer relationships. Feelings of isolation, bullying, and not fitting in were also common. In contrast, supportive relationships with trusted adults, greater understanding of autism, and adjustments to the school environment were associated with improved engagement and

attendance. The authors concluded that attendance difficulties are often linked to how young people experience their school environment rather than simply a lack of motivation to attend.

Historically, interventions often focused on helping neurodivergent young people adapt to school environments through behavioural, social, or emotional interventions. More recently, neurodiversity-affirming approaches have challenged this assumption, drawing on the neurodiversity paradigm, which conceptualises ASD, ADHD, and other neurodevelopmental differences as natural forms of human variation rather than deficits requiring correction. From this perspective, difficulties arise not solely from the individual but from a mismatch between individual needs and environmental demands (Botha and Frost, 2020; Pellicano and den Houting, 2022).

Within the context of EBSA, this shift has important implications for therapeutic practice. Rather than focusing exclusively on increasing attendance, practitioners are encouraged to explore how school environments are experienced by neurodivergent young people and to identify barriers that may contribute to distress and avoidance. Therapeutic interventions may therefore involve helping young people understand their sensory, emotional, and social experiences while simultaneously advocating for environmental adaptations that reduce distress and improve accessibility.

A particularly important concept within recent neurodiversity literature is masking or camouflaging, whereby autistic individuals consciously or unconsciously suppress autistic traits in order to meet social expectations. While masking may facilitate short-term participation in school, research suggests that it is associated with increased anxiety, exhaustion, reduced wellbeing, and autistic burnout (Cook et al., 2021). Some researchers have proposed that persistent masking may contribute to school avoidance by creating a cycle in which attendance becomes increasingly emotionally and cognitively demanding.

Neurodiversity-affirming approaches therefore emphasise acceptance, accommodation, and collaboration rather than normalisation. Therapeutic work may involve supporting self-understanding, developing self-advocacy skills, identifying sensory and emotional needs, and helping young people communicate these needs

effectively within school settings. Equally important is collaboration with schools to implement reasonable adjustments, such as sensory accommodations, flexible timetables, predictable routines, safe spaces, and alternative methods of participation where appropriate.

This approach aligns with recent calls for attendance difficulties to be understood through a contextual rather than individualised lens. For example, Carroll et al. (2026) argue that interventions focused solely on increasing attendance may be ineffective when environmental barriers remain unaddressed. Instead, sustainable re-engagement is more likely when schools adapt to meet the needs of neurodivergent learners and prioritise psychological safety, belonging, and accessibility. This perspective resonates with broader research demonstrating the importance of school belonging, supportive relationships, and inclusive educational environments for student engagement and wellbeing (Korpershoek et al., 2020).

Although neurodiversity-affirming practice has gained considerable traction in recent years, empirical evaluation remains relatively limited. Much of the current evidence is qualitative or conceptual, and further research is needed to determine which neurodiversity-affirming interventions are most effective in improving attendance, wellbeing, and educational engagement among neurodivergent young people experiencing EBSA. Nevertheless, the emerging literature suggests that understanding and addressing environmental barriers may be as important as supporting individual coping skills, representing a significant shift in how school attendance difficulties are conceptualised and addressed.

Neurodiversity-affirming practice requires therapists to move beyond deficit-based models and consider how educational environments can become more accessible and inclusive.

Family-Based Interventions

Family-based interventions have become increasingly important in EBSA research because attendance difficulties are now understood as occurring within a family system, rather than solely within the child. Recent literature suggests that parents can play a

crucial role in either maintaining or reducing attendance difficulties through their responses to anxiety, emotional distress, and school avoidance.

Family-based interventions have become an important part of supporting young people with EBSA. Recent research suggests that factors such as parental anxiety, confidence, emotional responses, and family communication may affect school attendance (Chockalingam et al., 2023). As a result, many interventions now aim to help parents understand anxiety, respond to avoidance in supportive ways, and encourage gradual re-engagement with school. McDonald et al. (2024) developed the ISAAC intervention, which focuses on helping parents feel more confident, improving communication between home and school, and providing practical strategies for managing school-related anxiety. However, researchers also emphasise that EBSA should not be seen as a problem caused only by families. Instead, attendance difficulties are better understood as the result of interactions between the young person, their family, the school environment, and other wider factors.

Family-based approaches are particularly valuable because they recognise that attendance difficulties occur within relational systems rather than existing solely within the individual child.

Lester and Michelson (2024) highlight the considerable emotional burden experienced by families supporting children with EBSA and argue that parents should be viewed as active partners in intervention rather than passive recipients of advice. The authors suggest that parent-focused support may improve outcomes by reducing family stress, strengthening communication with schools, and helping parents respond consistently to their child's distress. These findings reinforce the importance of family-based approaches that recognise attendance difficulties as occurring within broader relational systems.

Systemic and School-Based Approach

Contemporary research increasingly emphasises systemic and school-based interventions, recognising that attendance difficulties often arise through interactions between the young person and their wider environment. This perspective is reflected in ecological models such as the KiTeS Framework (Melvin et al., 2019), which highlights

the influence of individual, family, school, community, and societal factors on school attendance.

Recent research suggests that schools play a critical role in both preventing and responding to EBSA. Rather than focusing exclusively on improving attendance, school-based approaches aim to reduce distress and increase a young person's sense of safety, belonging, and engagement.

One recurring finding is the importance of positive relationships with school staff. Qualitative studies have consistently reported that young people experiencing EBSA value trusted adults who listen, understand their experiences, and provide emotional support. For example, Halligan and Cryer (2022) found that students identified supportive relationships and psychological safety as key factors in their successful re-engagement with education. Similarly, Chian et al. (2024) reported that pupils experiencing EBSA emphasised the importance of feeling understood, included, and respected within school environments.

Research has also highlighted the importance of **school belonging**. A sense of belonging refers to feeling accepted, valued, and connected within the school community. Studies by Allen et al. (2024) have demonstrated that school belonging is associated with improved wellbeing, engagement, and attendance. Conversely, experiences of isolation, bullying, or exclusion may increase vulnerability to attendance difficulties.

Schools have increasingly implemented practical accommodations to reduce barriers to attendance, including: Flexible timetables, graduated return-to-school plans, access to safe spaces, reduced sensory demands, adjustments for special educational needs, and emotional support programmes.

Such approaches are particularly relevant for neurodivergent young people, whose attendance difficulties may be linked to sensory overwhelm, social demands, or unmet learning needs.

Melvin et al. (2019) argue that effective responses to school attendance problems require consideration of influences across multiple ecological systems. Their KiTeS Framework suggests that interventions should target not only the young person's

emotional needs but also school practices, family circumstances, and wider environmental barriers.

Recent qualitative studies have strengthened support for systemic approaches. Halligan and Cryer (2022) found that students often described successful re-engagement as the result of multiple changes occurring simultaneously, including supportive relationships, environmental adaptations, increased understanding from staff, and flexible attendance expectations. These findings suggest that attendance difficulties are rarely resolved through individual therapeutic work alone.

Similarly, Chian et al. (2024) reported that both pupils and school staff viewed EBSA as requiring a whole-school response that promotes inclusion, emotional safety, and meaningful participation in school life.

The Role of Teachers

Teachers play a key role in supporting young people experiencing EBSA through the creation of emotionally safe and relationally supportive school environments. Research suggests that supportive teacher–student relationships are central to student engagement and wellbeing, particularly for those experiencing emotional distress or trauma (Wilson-Ching and Berger, 2024; Dods, 2013). Within trauma-informed frameworks, relational safety, consistency, and trust are considered essential foundations for learning and emotional regulation (Butler and Sultana, 2025).

Rather than focusing solely on attendance compliance, effective teacher responses prioritise understanding the emotional and environmental factors contributing to avoidance. Qualitative research indicates that students experiencing trauma or school-related anxiety often identify supportive relationships with trusted adults as a key factor in their ability to remain engaged with education (Krupina, 2025; Halligan and Cryer, 2022). These findings align with evidence that school belonging and perceived acceptance are strongly associated with motivation, engagement, and attendance outcomes (Korpershoek et al., 2020).

Trauma-informed and attachment-aware approaches further highlight the importance of reducing perceived threat within the school environment through predictable routines,

emotional attunement, and supportive relationships (Wilson-Ching and Berger, 2024). In addition, whole-school studies suggest that relational approaches can improve staff–student relationships, strengthen school climate, and enhance engagement when implemented consistently across settings (Jones and Harding, 2023). Collectively, the literature indicates that interventions are most effective when they promote belonging, emotional safety, and collaboration between schools and families, rather than relying on punitive or attendance-focused strategies (Lester and Michelson, 2024).

Towards Formulation-Based Practice new

Although systemic and school-based interventions are increasingly advocated, the evidence base remains relatively limited. Much of the research consists of qualitative studies, case studies, and practitioner reports rather than large-scale controlled trials. As a result, it is often difficult to determine which specific components of intervention are most effective. Nevertheless, there is growing consensus that attendance difficulties are best understood within their broader context and that interventions should address environmental as well as individual factors.

The literature increasingly suggests that no single intervention is sufficient to address the complexity of EBSA. Instead, effective practice appears to depend upon individualised formulations that integrate multiple perspectives.

A formulation-based approach enables therapists to consider, why school feels unsafe for this young person. What function avoidance serves. Which factors maintain attendance difficulties and which resources and strengths can support change.

This approach aligns closely with contemporary psychotherapy, which increasingly prioritises collaboration, contextual understanding, and personalised intervention over diagnosis-led treatment pathways.

Current evidence suggests that psychotherapeutic interventions are most effective when they move beyond attendance as the sole outcome and address the emotional, relational, and contextual factors underpinning school avoidance. While CBT remains the most extensively researched intervention, attachment-informed, trauma-informed, emotion regulation, neurodiversity-affirming, family-based, and systemic approaches

each offer valuable contributions. The growing emphasis on formulation-based practice reflects a broader shift towards understanding EBSA not as a behavioural problem to be corrected, but as a meaningful response to distress that requires compassionate, collaborative, and contextually informed intervention.

Chapter 6: Discussion

Research into EBSA has increased considerably over the past decade, reflecting growing concern about rising rates of school non-attendance and the associated impact on young people's mental health and educational outcomes. Contemporary research increasingly recognises that attendance difficulties are often driven by emotional distress rather than deliberate non-compliance, challenging earlier behavioural explanations of school absence. This shift has important implications for psychotherapy, as it suggests that interventions should focus not only on improving attendance but also on understanding the emotional, relational, and environmental factors that contribute to school avoidance.

From a psychotherapeutic perspective, EBSA is understood as more than a behavioural difficulty. It involves exploring how young people experience school, relationships, and emotional safety, and how these experiences influence their willingness and ability to attend school. This section critically reviews the current evidence, considering the strengths and limitations of the literature, competing conceptualisations of EBSA, and the implications for therapeutic practice.

A significant development within the literature has been the shift from viewing school non-attendance primarily as a behavioural problem towards understanding it as an expression of emotional distress. Melvin et al. (2019) found that anxiety, emotional overwhelm, and psychological distress frequently underpin attendance difficulties, supporting the view that school avoidance often functions as a coping strategy rather than an act of defiance. This conceptual shift has influenced contemporary interventions, which increasingly focus on addressing the emotional function of avoidance rather than simply increasing school attendance. However, much of the available evidence is cross-

sectional and correlational. As a result, it remains unclear whether emotional distress precedes school avoidance, develops as a consequence of prolonged absence, or whether the relationship is reciprocal. Longitudinal research is therefore needed to clarify the developmental pathways leading to EBSA.

Another strength of recent research is the increasing inclusion of young people's perspectives. Earlier studies often relied on reports from parents, teachers, or clinicians, whereas more recent qualitative research has explored the lived experiences of students themselves. Halligan and Cryer (2022) found that young people consistently described feeling understood, accepted, and emotionally safe within supportive relationships as essential to their re-engagement with education. Similarly, Chian et al. (2024) identified feelings of inclusion, belonging, and positive relationships with trusted adults as important factors influencing attendance. These findings support person-centred and attachment-based perspectives, which emphasise the importance of empathy, trust, and emotional safety in facilitating psychological change. Nevertheless, qualitative studies typically involve relatively small samples, meaning that findings cannot always be generalised to the wider EBSA population.

Despite these advances, important limitations remain within the evidence base. A large proportion of studies use cross-sectional designs, providing only a snapshot of young people's experiences at a single point in time. Consequently, the literature offers limited understanding of how attendance difficulties emerge, fluctuate, or resolve over time. In addition, much of the research has been conducted in Western countries, particularly the United Kingdom, Australia, and the United States. Cultural differences in educational systems, family expectations, and understandings of mental health may therefore limit the generalisability of current findings to other contexts.

One of the most significant challenges within the literature is the absence of a universally accepted definition of EBSA. Researchers continue to use a range of overlapping terms, including school refusal, school avoidance, school phobia, emotion-based school avoidance, emotion-based school non-attendance, and school distress. Although these terms are often used interchangeably, they reflect different conceptual understandings of attendance difficulties. As Heyne et al. (2019) argue, inconsistent terminology makes

it difficult to compare findings across studies, estimate prevalence accurately, and build a coherent evidence base.

Importantly, terminology is not merely a semantic issue. The language used to describe attendance difficulties reflects underlying theoretical assumptions and may influence professional practice. For example, the term school refusal can imply that the young person is actively choosing not to attend school, whereas terms such as school distress or emotionally based school avoidance emphasise the emotional suffering associated with attendance. From a person-centred perspective (Rogers, 1961/2004), language is important because it shapes how practitioners understand and respond to the individual. Viewing a young person as "resistant" may encourage behaviour-focused interventions, whereas understanding them as "distressed" is more likely to promote empathic, collaborative, and psychologically informed support.

Although cognitive-behavioural models currently have the strongest empirical evidence for reducing anxiety-related school avoidance, they have also been criticised for placing greater emphasis on changing individual thoughts and behaviours than on addressing wider contextual influences. Increasingly, researchers argue that EBSA should be understood within a broader ecological framework that considers relationships, school climate, neurodiversity, trauma, and family factors alongside individual psychological processes (Lester & Michelson, 2024). This reflects a growing consensus that attendance difficulties rarely arise from a single cause and are more effectively understood as the result of multiple interacting influences across the child's environment.

Although cognitive-behavioural models have strong empirical support for reducing anxiety-related avoidance, they have been criticised for locating the problem primarily within the individual. From a person-centred perspective, this risks overlooking the relational and environmental conditions that contribute to distress. Rather than viewing these approaches as competing explanations, contemporary research increasingly suggests they are complementary, with CBT addressing maintaining mechanisms while person-centred and systemic approaches provide a broader understanding of the child's lived experience.

CBT has been helpful in many cases, especially where anxiety is the main issue. However, there are also limits. CBT often focuses on thoughts and behaviours inside the individual. It may not fully include wider experiences such as, bullying, sensory overload, lack of support, difficult relationships in school, and unmet special educational needs.

From a person-centred perspective, it is important to ask what the behaviour means. Avoidance may not only be about anxiety. It may also be a response to feeling unsafe, overwhelmed, or not understood.

An exclusive focus on restoring attendance may inadvertently reinforce the perception that attendance is the primary therapeutic outcome. From a person-centred perspective, this risks overlooking the emotional meaning of school avoidance and may undermine therapeutic engagement if the young person feels their distress is secondary to attendance targets. Instead, therapy should prioritise developing psychological safety, emotional understanding, and collaborative formulation, recognising that sustainable improvements in attendance are more likely to follow when underlying distress is addressed.

For this reason, many researchers now suggest combining CBT with more relational and contextual understanding.

Although qualitative studies have considerably enhanced understanding of young people's experiences, much of the current evidence remains cross-sectional. Consequently, it is difficult to determine whether identified factors, such as anxiety, poor peer relationships, or school belonging, act as causes, consequences, or maintaining factors of EBSA. This limits confidence in recommendations regarding intervention timing and prevention.

Increasing recognition of neurodivergence has challenged traditional understandings of EBSA. Rather than conceptualising attendance difficulties solely as a consequence of anxiety or individual vulnerability, emerging research suggests that school avoidance may reflect a mismatch between the demands of the educational environment and the needs of neurodivergent young people. From this perspective, difficulties with attendance are not located entirely within the child but arise through the interaction

between the individual and their environment, particularly where school contexts are not sufficiently flexible, inclusive, or responsive.

This ecological interpretation shifts the focus away from “fixing” the young person towards considering how environments can be adapted to better support engagement, participation, and wellbeing. It reframes EBSA as an issue of person–environment fit, where distress may emerge when the demands placed on a young person exceed their capacity to cope within a given setting.

Carroll et al. (2026) reinforce this position by emphasising that wellbeing is strongly influenced by whether school environments are experienced as supportive, understanding, and psychologically safe. Where these conditions are absent, young people may struggle to sustain attendance, particularly when additional neurodevelopmental needs are present.

From a person-centred perspective, this aligns closely with the importance of acceptance, emotional safety, and environmental conditions that facilitate psychological growth. It highlights that sustainable engagement with education is more likely when the school environment supports the young person’s needs, rather than requiring them to adapt to conditions that may feel overwhelming or inaccessible.

A key debate in the EBSA literature is whether school attendance difficulties should be understood as problems within the young person or as the result of an interaction between the young person and their environment. Medical models focus on underlying conditions such as anxiety, ASD, or ADHD. These models can help identify a young person's needs and provide access to appropriate support and interventions. However, they can also place too much emphasis on the individual, without fully considering the influence of family relationships, the school environment, or wider social factors.

Relational and ecological models take a broader view. They suggest that EBSA develops through the interaction between the young person and their environment. Factors such as bullying, difficult relationships with staff or peers, sensory overload, unmet special educational needs, and a lack of belonging at school may all contribute to emotional distress and school avoidance. The KiTeS framework (Melvin et al., 2019) reflects this

approach by recognising that school attendance is influenced by the child, their family, the school, and the wider community.

Rather than seeing these perspectives as opposites, recent research suggests they should be used together. A diagnosis can help explain some of the challenges a young person faces, but it does not fully explain why school has become difficult for that individual. Formulation-based approaches bring these different factors together by considering how emotional, psychological, relational, and environmental influences interact in each young person's life.

From a person-centred perspective, this approach is particularly valuable because it focuses on understanding the young person's individual experiences rather than simply treating a diagnosis or trying to improve attendance. Instead of asking, 'What is wrong with this young person?', the focus shifts to asking, 'What has happened to this young person, and what does school avoidance mean for them?' This helps therapists develop a shared understanding of the young person's difficulties and plan support that reflects their unique needs and experiences.

Overall, the literature reflects a significant shift from behavioural explanations of school non-attendance towards relational and emotional understandings. Nevertheless, methodological weaknesses, inconsistent terminology, and a predominance of cross-sectional Western research continue to limit theoretical development. The emerging evidence suggests that no single model sufficiently explains EBSA. Instead, an integrative framework that combines cognitive-behavioural, systemic, ecological, and person-centred perspectives appears most consistent with the complexity of young people's experiences and offers the strongest foundation for psychotherapeutic practice.

From a person-centred psychotherapy perspective, EBSA is best understood as emotional distress that develops within relationships and environments. It is not just a behaviour problem. It is also a communication of need, difficulty, and experience.

A person-centred approach therefore focuses not only on attendance, but on understanding the young person, their emotional world, and the conditions they need in order to feel safe and supported.

Chapter 7: Implications for Psychotherapeutic Practice

EBSA has important implications for psychotherapy practice because it is best understood not simply as a behavioural issue, but as an expression of emotional distress within relationships and environments. From a person-centred perspective, EBSA can be viewed as a meaningful communication of inner experience rather than resistance or non-compliance. This means that therapeutic work must focus not only on attendance outcomes, but on understanding the young person's lived experience, emotional world, and relational context.

A central implication for practice is the importance of the therapeutic relationship itself. Carl Rogers (1957, 1959) argued that psychological change occurs when certain core conditions are present in the therapeutic relationship: empathy, unconditional positive regard, and congruence. In EBSA work, these conditions are particularly important because young people often experience shame, misunderstanding, or pressure from educational systems. An empathic stance allows the therapist to understand the young person's experience from their internal frame of reference. Unconditional positive regard helps reduce shame and defensiveness, especially when attendance has been a source of conflict. Congruence, or genuineness, helps establish trust in a context where young people may feel that adults are not fully honest or emotionally available.

In assessment, a person-centred approach prioritises understanding the subjective meaning of school for the young person. Rather than focusing immediately on categorising symptoms or behaviours, the therapist aims to explore how school is experienced emotionally and relationally. This includes exploring feelings before, during, and after school, as well as experiences of safety, threat, belonging, or exclusion. It is also important to understand relationships within school, particularly with peers and teachers, as well as experiences of bullying, shame, or academic pressure. In many cases, avoidance behaviour is better understood as a response to overwhelming emotional experience rather than a deliberate decision. Rogers (1961) emphasised that individuals have an inherent tendency towards growth and self-understanding when conditions are supportive. From this perspective, EBSA may be understood as occurring

when these conditions are disrupted, making it difficult for the young person to stay engaged with their environment.

Formulation in EBSA should also reflect person-centred principles. Rather than being expert-driven or diagnostic, formulation should be collaborative and flexible. The aim is to develop a shared understanding of what the young person is experiencing and what contributes to their distress. This includes emotional experiences, relational dynamics, and environmental factors. It is also important to explore the meaning of school for the young person. For some, school may represent fear of failure, social evaluation, sensory overwhelm, or separation from attachment figures. For others, it may be associated with experiences of rejection or lack of control. In person-centred practice, this meaning is central because behaviour is understood as an expression of subjective experience rather than simply a symptom to be removed.

Intervention planning should prioritise emotional safety and relational trust rather than immediate behavioural change. While increasing school attendance may be a long-term goal, the initial focus is often on reducing distress and strengthening the therapeutic relationship. Rogers (1967) emphasised that when individuals feel understood and accepted, they are more able to explore difficult experiences and move towards change. In EBSA work, this may involve helping the young person to express emotions such as anxiety, shame, anger, or sadness in a safe environment. It may also involve supporting the development of self-awareness and emotional regulation, not as techniques imposed on the individual, but as part of a process of self-understanding.

A key clinical implication is the importance of pacing. Many young people experiencing EBSA feel overwhelmed by expectations to return to school quickly. A person-centred approach therefore supports gradual change that is guided by the young person's readiness. This may include partial attendance or flexible engagement, but only when it aligns with the young person's emotional capacity. The focus is not on enforcing attendance, but on supporting movement towards greater psychological safety and engagement.

Family involvement is also important in clinical work with EBSA. Families often experience significant distress, uncertainty, and conflict around school attendance.

From a person-centred perspective, families should be seen as partners rather than causes of the problem. Therapeutic work may involve supporting parents to understand the young person's emotional experience, reducing blame, and increasing empathic communication within the family system. When parents are able to respond with greater understanding and less pressure, this can reduce emotional conflict and support the young person's sense of safety. However, it is also important to avoid placing responsibility solely on families, as EBSA typically develops through interactions between individual, relational, and environmental factors.

Multi-system collaboration is another essential aspect of practice. EBSA rarely exists within a single context, and effective support often requires coordination between therapists, schools, families, and sometimes wider services. Schools play a particularly important role in shaping the young person's daily emotional experience. Supportive relationships, predictable routines, and a sense of belonging can significantly influence recovery. From a person-centred perspective, collaboration should always keep the young person's experience at the centre. This means asking what feels safe or unsafe for them, what helps reduce distress, and how systems can respond in a way that promotes understanding rather than pressure.

Early intervention is also critical. Research suggests that EBSA can become more entrenched over time if distress is not addressed early. Early signs may include increasing anxiety about school, physical complaints, morning distress, or gradual withdrawal from attendance (Heyne et al., 2020, Elliott and Place, 2020). A person-centred approach emphasises responding to these early signs with empathy and curiosity rather than immediate correction. Early therapeutic engagement can help prevent the development of shame and entrenched avoidance patterns by providing emotional understanding before difficulties escalate.

Overall, EBSA has important implications for psychotherapy because it challenges practitioners to move beyond behavioural interpretations and attend to emotional meaning, relational safety, and lived experience. A person-centred approach, grounded in Rogers' core conditions of empathy, unconditional positive regard, and congruence (Rogers, 1957), provides a useful framework for this work. It supports a shift from viewing EBSA as a problem to be fixed, towards understanding it as a form of communication that

emerges when a young person's emotional needs are not fully met within their environment. In this sense, therapeutic work is not only about supporting attendance, but about restoring conditions that allow the young person to feel understood, accepted, and able to move towards growth at their own pace.

Chapter 8: Future research

Research into Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) has developed significantly in recent years, but there are still important gaps in both theory and evidence. Current literature has moved away from simple behavioural explanations and now includes emotional, relational, and ecological perspectives (Melvin et al., 2019). However, the field is still fragmented, and more integrated and methodologically strong research is needed.

One of the most important future directions is the development of integrative models. At present, EBSA is explained through several different approaches, including cognitive-behavioural models, attachment theory, neurodevelopmental perspectives, and systemic or ecological frameworks. Each of these explains part of the picture, but they are often used separately. This can lead to a fragmented understanding of EBSA in both research and practice. For example, CBT models focus on anxiety and avoidance learning (Kearney and Albano, 2004), while neurodiversity-informed approaches highlight sensory and environmental mismatch (Carroll et al., 2026). Attachment-based perspectives focus on separation and relational security. Future research should aim to bring these together into one clearer and more flexible model that reflects how EBSA usually appears in real clinical settings.

Another key gap is the lack of longitudinal and outcome-focused studies. Most EBSA research is cross-sectional, meaning it looks at young people at one point in time. This makes it difficult to understand how EBSA develops or changes. Longitudinal studies are needed to explore early signs, maintaining factors, and long-term outcomes. It is still not clear why some young people recover from EBSA while others continue to struggle with attendance over time. Research should also focus less only on attendance rates and

more on wider outcomes such as emotional wellbeing, relationships, and sense of belonging, since these may be more meaningful indicators of recovery.

Alongside this, there is a need for more quantitative research. Much of the current literature is qualitative and gives valuable insight into lived experience. However, there are fewer large-scale studies that measure risk factors, prevalence, and intervention outcomes. More quantitative work could help identify which factors are most strongly linked to EBSA, such as anxiety, family stress, school belonging, or neurodevelopmental differences. It would also help evaluate which interventions are most effective. A mixed-methods approach may be particularly useful, combining statistical patterns with lived experience to give a fuller understanding of EBSA.

An emerging area for future research is the role of shame. While anxiety is the most studied emotional factor, shame may also be important in EBSA. Shame is linked to feelings of being “not good enough” or exposed in front of others. Brown (2012, 2017) describes shame as a relational emotion that leads to withdrawal, silence, and hiding. This is highly relevant to school avoidance, where young people may withdraw from school to avoid situations where they feel judged or exposed. However, shame is rarely studied directly in EBSA research. Future studies should explore whether shame contributes to avoidance patterns and whether it affects recovery. This would also connect well with person-centred ideas about self-worth and conditions of worth (Rogers, 1957).

Another important area is digital therapy and online interventions. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a major increase in remote support and online therapy. This may be especially relevant for young people with EBSA, who may find it difficult to attend in-person services. However, there is still limited evidence about how effective digital interventions are for EBSA specifically. Future research should examine whether online therapy can support emotional regulation, reduce distress, and help young people gradually reconnect with education. It should also explore whether the therapeutic relationship can be effectively maintained online, particularly in relation to empathy and emotional safety.

Family and environmental changes are also important to consider. One recent but under-researched factor is the increase in parents working from home. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, many families now have more flexible working patterns. For some young people, having a parent at home may increase feelings of safety and make school attendance more difficult. For others, it may support stability. At the moment, there is very little research on how remote working patterns influence EBSA, but this is likely to be an important area for future study.

Finally, there is a need for more cross-cultural research. Most EBSA studies come from Western countries such as the UK, USA, and Australia. This means current understanding may reflect Western ideas about education, independence, and emotional expression. Future research should explore how EBSA is understood in different cultural contexts, including how families and schools respond to attendance difficulties. This is important for ensuring that interventions are inclusive and relevant across different populations.

In summary, future research in EBSA needs to move towards more integration, stronger methodology, and broader cultural understanding. Integrative models are needed to combine emotional, relational, and environmental explanations. Longitudinal and quantitative studies are needed to strengthen the evidence base. Digital therapy, shame, family working patterns, and cross-cultural differences are all important emerging areas that require further investigation. Together, these developments would help create a more complete and clinically useful understanding of EBSA that reflects both research evidence and lived experience.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

This dissertation has explored EBSA through a psychological and psychotherapeutic lens, with particular attention to emotional, relational, and systemic factors. Across the literature, there is a clear shift away from understanding school attendance difficulties as simple behavioural non-compliance and towards more complex explanations that include emotional distress, family dynamics, school environment, and neurodevelopmental differences.

The review shows that EBSA is best understood as a multifactorial difficulty rather than a single clinical condition. Cognitive-behavioural models have been influential in explaining avoidance through anxiety and negative reinforcement processes, and they remain useful in some cases. However, they do not fully capture the relational and contextual nature of many attendance difficulties. More recent research highlights the importance of belonging, safety, and relationships within school environments, suggesting that EBSA is often linked to how safe and understood a young person feels within their context.

Neurodiversity-informed research further develops this understanding by showing that autistic and ADHD traits may increase vulnerability to school-related distress, particularly where environments are not adapted to individual needs. This supports a shift towards a "person–environment fit" model rather than a purely deficit-based view of the individual. Similarly, attachment-informed and systemic perspectives highlight the importance of relationships, particularly between young people, parents, and key adults in school.

Despite these developments, the field remains fragmented. There is no single agreed definition of EBSA, and multiple overlapping terms are used in the literature. This makes it difficult to build a consistent evidence base or compare findings across studies. In addition, much of the research is cross-sectional, meaning that long-term developmental pathways into and out of EBSA are still not well understood.

A further limitation is the underdevelopment of emotional mechanisms in the literature. While anxiety is widely studied, other emotions such as shame, humiliation, and relational threat are less well explored, despite being highly relevant to withdrawal and avoidance behaviour. There is also limited research on cultural differences, family working patterns, and how modern social changes may influence attendance difficulties.

From a psychotherapeutic perspective, EBSA is best understood as an expression of emotional distress that emerges within relationships and environments. Rather than viewing avoidance as the primary problem, it can be understood as meaningful communication of distress and unmet emotional need. This perspective shifts the focus

from controlling behaviour to understanding experience, supporting emotional safety, and improving relational conditions that allow engagement to return.

Clinically, this has important implications. Assessment should prioritise understanding the young person's lived experience rather than focusing only on attendance patterns. Formulation should be collaborative and consider emotional, relational, and environmental factors. Intervention should focus on reducing distress, strengthening safety, and working at a pace that is emotionally tolerable for the young person. Family involvement and multi-system collaboration are also essential, as EBSA typically develops across several interacting contexts.

Overall, this dissertation suggests that effective understanding and support for EBSA requires an integrated approach that combines emotional, relational, and systemic perspectives. While progress has been made in recent years, further research is needed to develop more coherent models, stronger longitudinal evidence, and a better understanding of emotional processes such as shame and belonging. Future work should also consider cultural differences and changing social conditions that may influence school attendance.

In conclusion, EBSA is not best understood as a simple attendance problem. It is a complex and meaningful expression of distress that reflects how a young person experiences themselves, their relationships, and their environment. A person-centred psychotherapeutic approach therefore offers a useful framework for understanding EBSA, as it prioritises empathy, emotional meaning, and the conditions that support psychological safety and growth.

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