

**Recognising and Responding to Early Emotional Barriers to School
Attendance in Primary Schools: Parent and School Staff Perspectives**

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Summary

This thesis explores how early Emotional Barriers to School Attendance (EBSA) are recognised, understood and responded to within primary school contexts. It adopts an ecological and relational perspective, positioning EBSA as an emerging process shaped through interactions between children, families and school systems, rather than as an individual difficulty.

The first chapter presents a semi-systematic literature review examining how EBSA has been conceptualised, with particular attention to early identification, ecological influences and professional responses. The review highlights a shift towards relational and preventative approaches, while identifying a gap in research exploring early-stage EBSA within primary settings.

The second chapter outlines an empirical study involving semi-structured interviews and a focus group with parents and school staff, alongside a small-scale survey to provide contextual insight. Survey findings indicated patterns of risk and resilience across child, family and school domains, with a trend for boys and older children to experience higher levels of risk and lower levels of resilience. Reflexive thematic analysis of the qualitative data identified EBSA as a subtle and evolving process, reflected in early indicators such as anxiety, somatic complaints and fluctuating engagement. The findings emphasise the importance of relational safety, flexible school responses and the influence of wider systems, particularly during transitions.

These findings informed the development of the SENSE framework, which integrates relational, emotional and systemic factors to support early identification and intervention in practice.

The final chapter reflects on the research process, including methodological decisions, limitations and professional learning. Overall, the study contributes to an understanding of EBSA as a relational and ecological process, and highlights the importance of early, contextually informed approaches within educational psychology practice.

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List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full Term
BERA	British Educational Research Association
BPS	British Psychological Society
CYP	Children and Young People
DfE	Department for Education
EBSA	Emotional Barriers to School Attendance (also used to refer to Emotionally Based School Avoidance)
EBSNA	Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance
EHCP	Education, Health and Care Plan
EP	Educational Psychologist
EPS	Educational Psychology Service
EYFS	Early Years Foundation Stage
HCPC	Health and Care Professions Council
KS1	Key Stage 1
KS2	Key Stage 2
LA	Local Authority
LSA	Learning Support Assistant
NAPEP	National Association of Principal Educational Psychologists
PRISMA	Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses
RTA	Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Abbreviation	Full Term
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
SENCo	Special Educational Needs Coordinator
TA	Teaching Assistant
TEP	Trainee Educational Psychologist

Chapter 1: Literature Review

1.0 Introduction and Context

Improving school attendance is a national and local priority, with rates of persistent and severe absence having increased significantly following the COVID-19 pandemic (DfE, 2024a). This rise has prompted renewed concern regarding the effectiveness of existing attendance responses and the adequacy of current systems in addressing the needs of CYP experiencing barriers to education (DfE, 2024b; House of Commons Library, 2024, May 17).

Emotional Barriers to School Attendance (EBSA) is one of a number of terms increasingly used to describe school attendance difficulties that are driven primarily by negative emotional responses, most commonly anxiety, rather than deliberate non-compliance (Chian et al., 2024; Heyne et al., 2019; Trafford Services for Education, 2021). EBSA is associated with significant emotional and physical distress, including heightened anxiety, somatic symptoms, and reluctance to attend school (Finning et al., 2019; Onslow & Cartmell, 2025). While difficulties may initially present as intermittent or partial attendance, avoidance can become increasingly linked to the school environment over time, reinforcing anxiety and escalating absence (Ingul et al., 2019; Kearney & Silverman, 1990). Contemporary professional guidance emphasises that EBSA should be understood not as a discrete diagnostic category, but as a dynamic process reflecting the interaction of emotional vulnerability, environmental demands, and relational experiences (Melvin et al., 2019; NAPEP, 2026).

A pupil is classified as persistently absent if they miss 10% or more of possible school sessions over a defined period (DfE, 2024a). Rates of persistent absence have increased nationally since the COVID-19 pandemic, with recent data indicating that approximately 18% of CYP now meet this threshold (down from 20% in 2022/23), compared to pre-pandemic levels of 10.9% in the 2018/19 academic year (GOV.UK, 2024, 2026). This substantial increase has intensified national and local authority focus on attendance, particularly in relation to identifying pupils at risk earlier and preventing the escalation of absence (DfE, 2024b).

School absence is concerning due to its association with adverse outcomes across multiple domains of wellbeing. CYP who experience prolonged or repeated absence are more likely to encounter difficulties in social relationships, emotional wellbeing, and longer-term educational and life outcomes (Finning et al., 2019; Kearney, 2008). The relationship between attendance and attainment is well established, with evidence consistently demonstrating poorer academic outcomes for pupils with higher rates of absence (DfE, 2024a; Hancock et al., 2013). Persistent absence is also disproportionately concentrated among vulnerable groups, including pupils eligible for Pupil Premium funding and those identified as having special educational needs and disabilities (DfE, 2026; House of Commons Library, 2024, May 17). These patterns highlight the intersection between attendance, vulnerability, and inequality (Gottfried, 2014).

Within this broader attendance landscape, EBSA has gained increasing attention as a distinct and complex form of non-attendance that requires responses beyond attendance enforcement alone (Heyne et al., 2019; Melvin et al., 2019). There has been a marked shift away from deficit-based interpretations of 'school refusal' towards more compassionate, child-centred conceptualisations that recognise EBSA as a response to interacting emotional, social, and environmental stressors (Halligan & Cryer, 2022). Professional guidance from the National Association of Principal Educational Psychologists UK (NAPEP) explicitly advocates for a paradigm shift away from punitive or compliance-driven approaches towards relational, preventative, and system-focused responses that prioritise engagement and wellbeing (NAPEP, 2026). This shift is echoed in practice-informed perspectives from the Barriers to Education project (Barriers to Education, 2025), which foregrounds the importance of recognising and addressing the barriers within educational systems that make attendance difficult for some CYP (DfE, 2024b). This work emphasises that language, school culture, and professional responses play a critical role in shaping experiences of attendance, arguing that framing difficulties as 'barriers' rather than individual failings may support earlier, more compassionate intervention (Barriers to Education, 2025; Halligan & Cryer, 2022). Such perspectives reinforce the importance of attending to environmental and relational factors alongside individual emotional need.

From a professional practice perspective, there is growing recognition that earlier identification of EBSA may reduce the likelihood of difficulties becoming entrenched and may support more timely and proportionate intervention (Ingul et al., 2019; Melvin et al., 2019). The recent Department for Education (DfE) statutory guidance, *Working together to improve school attendance* requires schools to take a more proactive approach to identifying pupils at risk of poor attendance through the use of data and graduated response systems (DfE, 2024b). However, professional guidance cautions that early identification should not rely on attendance metrics alone. NAPEP emphasises the importance of recognising emerging indicators of emotional distress, changes in engagement, and relational difficulties as part of a broader, preventative approach to attendance (NAPEP, 2026). This is echoed within wider research, which highlights that early signs of school attendance difficulties are often subtle, context-dependent, and embedded within everyday experiences, making them difficult to capture through standardised measures (Finning et al., 2019; Havik et al., 2015a). Situating EBSA within this contemporary policy and professional landscape therefore provides an essential foundation for examining how early identification is conceptualised, researched, and operationalised in practice. Understanding EBSA as a systemic and relational issue, rather than solely an attendance problem, highlights the need for research that explores how early indicators are recognised and responded to across family and school contexts (Alaimo & Kelly, 2025; Bond et al., 2024).

1.1 Conceptualising EBSA

1.1.1 Terminology and Conceptual Evolution

EBSA is a term increasingly used to describe school attendance difficulties driven primarily by emotional distress, rather than deliberate non-compliance or lack of motivation. Historically, the literature has used a range of terms to describe this phenomenon, contributing to conceptual confusion across both research and practice (Heyne et al., 2019). The earliest formal recognition of attendance difficulties rooted in emotional distress appears in the work of Broadwin (1932), who described the role of anxiety in preventing school attendance as a form of ‘neurosis’. This conceptualisation later became known as *school phobia* (Berg et al., 1969; Johnson

et al., 1941), reflecting a predominantly psychiatric framing that located difficulty within the child.

Over time, researchers and practitioners shifted away from explicitly medicalised or diagnostic language towards more descriptive and function-oriented labels. During the 1990s, the term *school refusal behaviour* became increasingly common (Kearney & Silverman, 1990, 1993; Last & Strauss, 1990). While this represented a step away from pathologising school absence, it has been criticised for its breadth and lack of specificity. Kearney and Silverman (1991) defined school refusal behaviour as non-attendance for child-motivated reasons, without specifying the nature or function of these motivations (Heyne, 2019). Consequently, the term has become almost synonymous with general school attendance problems, encompassing a wide range of heterogeneous difficulties and offering limited explanatory clarity.

To address this, authors such as Havik et al. (2015a, 2015b) and Elliott (1999) have emphasised the importance of distinguishing emotionally driven non-attendance from other forms of attendance difficulty, such as truancy. A key differentiating factor is motivation to attend school. Whereas truancy is often associated with disengagement and concealment, EBSA is characterised by significant emotional distress that inhibits attendance despite a child's desire to attend (Elliott, 1999). This distinction has contributed to the development of more emotionally informed terminologies, including EBSA, which are increasingly used across research, policy and practice contexts.

This conceptual shift is reinforced within policy. The Department for Education's *Working together to improve school attendance* statutory guidance (DfE, 2024b) explicitly recognises that pupils may face barriers to attendance related to mental or physical ill health, special educational needs, or emotional difficulties, and emphasises the importance of understanding these barriers and working collaboratively with families to address them (DfE, 2024b, paras. 14-15, 19). The guidance further acknowledges that many pupils experience everyday but challenging emotions, such as anxiety related to friendships or academic demands, which can make attendance difficult (DfE, 2024b, paras. 54-55) and highlights the need for adjustments to support pupils with more complex needs (DfE, 2024b, para.

58). Taken together, this reflects a broader move away from compliance-driven interpretations towards a more contextualised and needs-led understanding of attendance difficulties.

Recent conceptualisations place emotional experience at the centre of school attendance difficulties. EBSA foregrounds emotional distress including anxiety, low mood, and overwhelming affect, as underpinning avoidance behaviours without positioning the child as intentionally non-compliant (Lester & Michelson, 2024; McDonald et al., 2024). This aligns with Pellegrini's (2007) critique that earlier terminology often adopted a within-child model, neglecting the role of school and wider systemic influences. Lauchlan (2003) similarly conceptualises attendance difficulties as existing along a spectrum, arising for 'a diversity of reasons' (p. 133), highlighting the heterogeneity and complexity of experiences captured under the EBSA umbrella.

These developments reflect a broader conceptual shift towards understanding attendance difficulties as dynamic, relational, and contextually situated. Terminology is therefore not neutral; it shapes how difficulties are understood, the extent to which early indicators are recognised, and the nature of responses implemented within practice. While EBSA has been valuable in foregrounding emotional distress, recent work has highlighted ongoing limitations in existing terminology, particularly in capturing the multi-layered and systemic nature of attendance difficulties (Onslow & Cartmell, 2025).

In response to this, the present study adopts the term Emotional Barriers to School Attendance. The inclusion of barriers is intentional, reflecting a shift away from within-child or deficit-oriented explanations towards a broader, more ecological understanding. This framing recognises that attendance difficulties may arise not only from internal emotional experiences, but through interactions between emotional, relational, and contextual factors across systems. In doing so, it avoids assumptions of deliberate refusal or defiance, instead emphasising the presence of obstacles that shape a child's capacity to engage with school.

This conceptualisation aligns with contemporary research and policy which emphasise the importance of understanding attendance within an ecological and relational framework (DfE, 2024b; Lester & Michelson, 2024), while also reflecting

the findings of the present study, where attendance difficulties were consistently described as emerging through interactions across family, school, and wider systems. Adopting Emotional Barriers to School Attendance therefore provides a conceptually coherent and analytically useful framework, supporting a more nuanced understanding of early indicators and experiences.

1.1.2 EBSA, Anxiety, and Emotional Distress

EBSA is characterised by the severe emotional upset and negative emotions experienced in anticipation of attending school (Berg, 2002; Berg et al., 1969; Elliott, 1999). In most cases, these difficulties are underpinned by anxiety, which is a multidimensional construct comprising physiological, cognitive, and affective components (Maynard et al., 2015; Rappo et al., 2017; Thambirajah et al., 2008; WSCC, 2022). This multidimensional nature of anxiety likely explains the vast heterogeneity observed across cases of EBSA, as well as the frequent association with subjective health complaints, such as headaches, stomach aches, and fatigue (Havik et al., 2015b; Maynard et al., 2015).

Systematic reviews have provided empirical support for the relationship between EBSA and anxiety. Finning et al. (2019) conducted the first quantitative synthesis of studies explicitly measuring anxiety using validated scales and concluded that individuals with school refusal behaviours are significantly more likely to present with generalised anxiety disorder. Similarly, Finning et al. (2022) and Egger et al. (2003) found associations between anxious school refusal and diagnosable psychiatric disorders, including both anxiety and depressive disorders. These findings highlight that EBSA is frequently, though not exclusively, linked with mental health difficulties. This association aligns with the special educational needs and disability (SEND) code of practice (Department for Education and Department of Health, 2015), which recognises emotional difficulties and mental health needs as part of social, emotional, and mental health (SEMH) needs, indicating that EBSA may act as a signal for the presence of underlying special educational needs (SEN).

Historically, EBSA (previously termed school phobia) (Johnson et al., 1941) was conceptualised as a direct result of psychiatric or neurotic difficulties. Early case studies, such as Coolidge et al. (1957), characterised children exhibiting school phobia as temporarily neurotic or demonstrating ‘characterological disturbance’ (p.

305). Subsequent parent interview studies indicated that over 50% of children meeting criteria for school refusal also met diagnostic thresholds for psychiatric disorders, while an additional 30% displayed significant anxiety confined to the school context without meeting formal diagnostic criteria (Bools et al., 1990). Berg et al. (1993) found comparable rates of mental health difficulties in children with low school attendance (defined as $\geq 40\%$ absence), highlighting the potential for unmet emotional needs within this population.

Although EBSA is strongly associated with anxiety, evidence suggests that it is neither synonymous with psychiatric disorder nor entirely explained by it. Berg et al. (1993) noted that while psychiatric difficulties may co-occur with EBSA, many children do not meet diagnostic thresholds. West Sussex County Council (WSCC) (2022) proposed that anxiety may act to maintain or exacerbate EBSA rather than serve as its sole cause. In this model, repeated absence increases anticipatory anxiety about returning to school, creating a self-reinforcing cycle that is difficult to break (Havik et al., 2015a). This dynamic may partly explain why interventions, such as cognitive-behavioural therapy and psychosocial support, have mixed efficacy; while these approaches can support school reintegration, they may not fully address the initial triggers of EBSA (Last et al., 1998; Maynard et al., 2015). Ingul and Nordahl (2013) further emphasise that anxiety itself does not directly predict absenteeism, but rather interacts with additional risk factors, including bullying, resilience, and contextual stressors.

Conceptualising EBSA solely through a ‘within-child’ or medical model is therefore insufficient to capture the complexity of these behaviours (Thambirajah et al., 2008). Contemporary perspectives recommend an intersectional approach, recognising that multiple individual, familial, school, and environmental factors converge to shape each child’s experience (Carbado et al., 2013). This approach encourages practitioners to consider the interplay of emotional, social, and contextual factors when assessing and supporting children experiencing EBSA.

Statutory guidance in England reinforces this understanding. The Department for Education (DfE, 2024b) highlights that attendance difficulties may be influenced by emotional or mental health needs and recommends that schools and local authorities listen to and address these barriers collaboratively with families (paras.

14-15, 37, 54-55). The guidance emphasises that supportive interventions, early identification, and reasonable adjustments are critical to facilitating school attendance for children experiencing anxiety-driven difficulties (DfE, 2024b, paras. 19, 58). By conceptualising EBSA as anxiety-driven rather than behaviourally motivated, schools can adopt preventative and developmentally sensitive approaches that mitigate distress, promote reintegration, and reduce the risk of long-term avoidance.

1.1.3 Theoretical Models: Functional and Spectrum-based Approaches

Theoretical models of EBSA increasingly emphasise functional and ecological perspectives. Functional models conceptualise school refusal in terms of the purposes or functions that non-attendance serves for the child. For example, school avoidance may operate to reduce anxiety, escape emotionally distressing situations, or gain relief from internal discomfort (Kearney, 2007). Understanding school non-attendance in functional terms has been instrumental in clarifying the mechanisms that maintain attendance difficulties and has directly informed intervention strategies focused on reducing avoidance and promoting adaptive coping behaviours (Heyne, 2019; Last et al., 1998).

More recent conceptualisations adopt a spectrum-based approach (see Figure 1), recognising EBSA as varying in intensity, persistence, and impact rather than representing a discrete diagnostic category (Halligan & Cryer, 2022; Lester & Michelson, 2024). Within this framework, EBSA ranges from subtle, early indicators of emotional distress affecting attendance, such as reluctance to attend school, emotional dysregulation, or partial attendance, through to severe, entrenched patterns of non-attendance (Havik et al., 2015b; Thambirajah et al., 2008). Conceptualising EBSA along a spectrum allows for early identification and preventative interventions, capturing CYP who may not yet meet thresholds for persistent absence but are experiencing emerging emotional barriers to education (McDonald et al., 2024).

Figure 1

EBSA as a Spectrum of Needs



Note. Adapted from Holder (2022)

Spectrum-based models emphasise the interconnectedness of child, family, and school factors, aligning with ecological perspectives that locate EBSA within broader systems rather than solely within the individual child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Pellegrini, 2007). This approach recognises the interaction of individual vulnerabilities, family dynamics, school climate, and peer relationships in the development and maintenance of EBSA, underscoring the need for systemic, collaborative responses to attendance difficulties (Finning et al., 2019; Halligan & Cryer, 2022). It also highlights the importance of early intervention, enabling supports to be implemented before difficulties become entrenched and resistant to change (Lester & Michelson, 2024).

Professional guidance emphasises this systems-oriented, needs-led conceptualisation. The NAPEP EBSA best practice position paper (NAPEP, 2026) emphasises that school attendance difficulties should be understood as signals of unmet emotional, educational, or environmental needs, rather than as indicators of poor motivation or parental failure. This aligns with practice-informed frameworks such as the Barriers to Education project (2025), which advocate for language and interventions that foreground systemic barriers rather than attributing difficulties solely to the child (Thambirajah et al., 2008; WSCC, 2022). Similarly, statutory guidance in England underscores the importance of listening to barriers, understanding emotional and mental health needs, and adopting collaborative approaches to support attendance (DfE, 2024b, paras. 14-15, 37, 54-55, 58).

Taken together, these functional, spectrum-based, and ecological perspectives support a compassionate, needs-led understanding of EBSA that prioritises early identification, systemic assessment, and collaborative interventions.

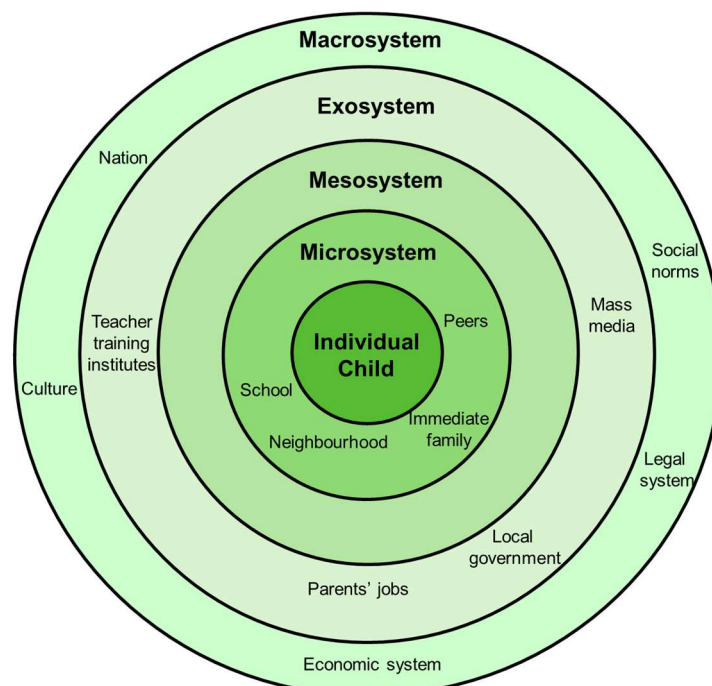
This conceptualisation shifts the focus away from deficit-oriented or individualised explanations, instead emphasising the dynamic interplay between emotional distress, environmental context, and school experiences, which is central to effective support and intervention.

1.2 Ecological Risk and Protective Factors

Contemporary literature conceptualises EBSA within an ecological framework, recognising that school attendance difficulties emerge through the interaction of individual, familial, and school-based factors over time (Kearney & Albano, 2004; Leduc et al., 2024). Rather than locating EBSA solely within the child, ecological perspectives emphasise the dynamic relationships between the child and their environment, and how these relationships may either exacerbate or buffer emotional distress (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Heyne et al., 2019) (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model



Note: Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model illustrating how individual development is shaped by interactions across micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems, providing a conceptual framework for understanding emotional barriers to school attendance. Adapted from Bronfenbrenner (1979).

This approach highlights that EBSA is rarely attributable to a single cause and instead reflects cumulative processes that may either be exacerbated or buffered by environmental responses (Kearney, 2008). This perspective aligns with a preventative focus, as it highlights points within the system where early indicators may emerge and where timely support may reduce the risk of difficulties becoming entrenched (Finning et al., 2019).

1.2.1 Microsystem Factors: Child-level Experiences and Vulnerability

At the level of the child's immediate environment, anxiety is consistently identified as a central factor associated with EBSA (Finning et al., 2019; Melvin et al., 2019). Emotional dysregulation, negative cognitions, and somatic symptoms may emerge in response to perceived school-based stressors, particularly during periods of transition or increased academic or social demand. These experiences may initially fluctuate but can become increasingly linked to the school context, reinforcing patterns of avoidance over time (Kearney & Silverman, 1990). Reduced self-efficacy has also been identified as contributing to vulnerability (Ingul et al., 2019).

SEND, particularly autism, is strongly associated with EBSA, with anxiety acting as a key mediating factor (Adams et al., 2025; Ochi et al., 2020). Sensory sensitivities, social communication differences, and heightened vulnerability to environmental unpredictability may increase emotional load, particularly when school environments are insufficiently flexible or responsive (Ashburner et al., 2008; Munkhaugen et al., 2017). For these CYP, school-related stressors may accumulate more rapidly, increasing the likelihood that emotional distress begins to affect attendance (Melvin et al., 2019; Ochi et al., 2020). Importantly, early indicators may be subtle and easily overlooked, particularly when attendance difficulties are intermittent or masked by partial attendance (Havik et al., 2015a).

1.2.2 Mesosystem Factors: Interactions Between Family and School

Interactions between family and school contexts play a critical role in shaping attendance trajectories. At the mesosystem level, the quality of interactions between family and school plays a critical role in shaping attendance experiences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Supportive communication and collaborative problem-solving between families and schools have been identified as protective factors that

may interrupt emerging patterns of avoidance and support early intervention (Ingul et al., 2019; Sheridan & Kratochwill, 2007).

Conversely, inconsistent responses, breakdowns in communication, lack of shared understanding, or reliance on attendance-driven frameworks may increase parental anxiety and reinforce avoidance behaviours (Havik et al., 2015a; Heyne et al., 2019). Parental and family factors are also influential, particularly in the early stages of EBSA. Parental anxiety, overprotection, or uncertainty about how best to respond to a child's distress may inadvertently reinforce avoidance behaviours, even when intentions are supportive (Ingul et al., 2019; Kearney & Silverman, 1990). Where families experience additional stressors, such as mental health difficulties or limited access to support, the capacity to buffer school-related anxiety may be reduced (Melvin et al., 2019). These factors interact with school responses, highlighting the importance of coordinated, empathetic approaches during the early stages of difficulty (Epstein, 2018; Sheridan & Kratochwill, 2007).

1.2.3 Exosystem and Contextual Factors: School Environments and Wider Influences

School-based and wider contextual factors further influence risk and protection. Experiences of relational safety, predictability and inclusion within school environments are consistently associated with improved engagement, whereas perceived threat, pressure or lack of understanding may intensify distress (Havik et al., 2015a; Kearney & Graczyk, 2014). Challenges within student-teacher relationships, difficulties within peer relationships, academic pressures and changes in routine have all been identified as contributing to school-related anxiety (Ingul et al., 2019; Melvin et al., 2019).

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated many of these dynamics. Disruptions to routines, prolonged periods of remote learning and reduced opportunities for social engagement have been associated with increased anxiety and reduced tolerance for school-related stressors (Totsika et al., 2024). For some CYP, returning to school following periods of absence has heightened emotional responses, contributing to emerging patterns of EBSA (Lester & Michelson, 2024; Totsika et al., 2024). These contextual changes have reinforced the need for

systems that are sensitive to early indicators of distress rather than reactive to entrenched absence (DfE, 2024b; NAPEP, 2026).

1.2.4 Interaction, Accumulation, and Implications for Early Identification

Across ecological levels, the literature highlights that EBSA is rarely attributable to a single factor. Instead, attendance difficulties emerge through the accumulation and interaction of vulnerabilities and stressors over time (Ingul et al., 2019; Melvin et al., 2019). Professional guidance emphasises that protective factors are not limited to individual support but include systemic conditions such as inclusive school culture, flexible policies, and proactive transition planning (DfE, 2024b; NAPEP, 2026). NAPEP identifies these universal practices as key protective mechanisms that may reduce the likelihood of anxiety-driven avoidance becoming entrenched (NAPEP, 2026). Similarly, practice-informed frameworks, including the WARMTH framework developed through the Barriers to Education project (Barriers to Education, 2025), emphasise wellbeing, affirmation and relational safety as foundational conditions for engagement (Halligan & Cryer, 2022). From an ecological perspective, these approaches emphasise that modifying environments and systems may be as important as individual-level intervention in preventing EBSA (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Understanding EBSA through an ecological lens therefore has clear implications for early identification. Indicators of emerging EBSA may be observable across multiple contexts, including changes in emotional presentation, patterns of partial attendance, increased parental concern, or shifts in school engagement (Havik et al., 2015a; Ingul et al., 2019). Recognising these indicators requires a holistic approach that attends to interactions within and between systems, rather than reliance on attendance data alone (DfE, 2024b; Melvin et al., 2019). This ecological framing provides a foundation for examining how early identification processes may be operationalised within school and local authority contexts.

1.3 Professional and Systemic Perspectives

Understanding how EBSA is conceptualised and addressed within professional practice requires consideration of how schools, families and local authorities interpret and respond to attendance difficulties (Heyne et al., 2019; Melvin

et al., 2019). Professional and systemic perspectives play a critical role in shaping how EBSA is understood, responded to and operationalised within practice (DfE, 2024b; NAPEP, 2026). They shape not only how EBSA is recognised, but also which responses are prioritised and at what stage intervention occurs (Boaler et al., 2024; Corcoran et al., 2024). As such, they are central in determining whether early indicators of EBSA are identified and addressed, or whether difficulties escalate before support is mobilised (Boaler et al., 2024; DfE, 2024b).

1.3.1 Professional Conceptualisations of EBSA in Practice

Professional understandings of EBSA have evolved alongside shifts in terminology and theory (Melvin et al., 2019). Contemporary practice increasingly reflects a move away from behaviourist or compliance-based interpretations of non-attendance towards more relational and needs-led conceptualisations (Elliott & Place, 2019; Halligan & Cryer, 2022). Within this framing, EBSA is understood as an expression of emotional distress that requires understanding rather than sanction (Kearney, 2008; NAPEP, 2026). However, the literature suggests that professional conceptualisations are not always consistent across settings, with variation in how attendance difficulties are labelled, prioritised and responded to within schools and services (Elliott & Place, 2019; Heyne et al., 2019).

This lack of shared conceptualisation can contribute to delayed or fragmented responses, particularly in the early stages of EBSA (Ingul et al., 2019). Where attendance difficulties are viewed primarily through an attendance or behaviour lens, early emotional indicators may be overlooked (Havik et al., 2015a). In contrast, approaches that foreground emotional wellbeing and contextual understanding are more likely to support preventative and graduated responses (DfE, 2024b; NAPEP, 2026). These differences highlight the importance of developing shared frameworks that support professionals to recognise and respond to emerging EBSA in a consistent and compassionate manner (Melvin et al., 2019).

1.3.2 Parent and CYP Perspectives Within Systems of Support

Parent and CYP perspectives provide important insight into how EBSA is experienced and negotiated within systems of support (Halligan & Cryer, 2022). Accounts from families highlight that feeling blamed, dismissed or excluded from

decision-making can exacerbate anxiety and undermine trust (Elliott & Place, 2019; Sheridan & Kratochwill, 2007). Conversely, early, collaborative engagement can support emotional containment and problem-solving (DfE, 2024b; Epstein, 2018). CYP perspectives further highlight the importance of being heard, having emotional needs recognised and feeling safe within school contexts (Finning et al., 2019; Halligan & Cryer, 2022). These perspectives reinforce the need for professional approaches that are relational, collaborative and responsive to early signs of distress, rather than reactive to entrenched absence (Melvin et al., 2019; NAPEP, 2026).

1.3.3 The Role of Policy and Statutory Guidance

UK legislation and statutory guidance provide the structural context within which attendance is monitored and addressed. Recent policy requires schools to proactively use data to identify pupils at risk and take a more proactive approach to improving attendance through graduated response systems (DfE, 2024b). While these developments reflect a shift towards preventative approaches, policy intentions are not always translated consistently into practice (Lester & Michelson, 2024). In particular, attendance-focused accountability measures may sit in tension with needs-led responses to EBSA, creating uncertainty for professionals navigating competing demands (Melvin et al., 2019; NAPEP, 2026). Without clear frameworks that integrate emotional wellbeing with attendance expectations, there is a risk that early indicators of EBSA are subsumed within broader attendance monitoring processes (Havik et al., 2015a; Ingul et al., 2019). This highlights the importance of operational tools and shared professional understanding.

1.3.4 The Educational Psychologist's Role in Early Identification and Systemic Response

Within this landscape, the role of the Educational Psychologist (EP) is positioned as particularly significant. EPs are uniquely placed to bridge child-level understanding with systemic practice, drawing on psychological theory, assessment and consultation to support early identification of EBSA (Farrell & Woods, 2015; Wagner, 2000). NAPEP explicitly identifies the EP role as central to supporting early identification through workforce development and systemic analysis (NAPEP, 2026).

This positioning is consistent with the Currie Matrix, which conceptualises EP practice across multiple levels (individual, establishment and system) and functions (assessment, consultation, intervention, training and research) (Scottish Executive, 2002). While the matrix offers a helpful heuristic for articulating the breadth of EP contribution, its application to early identification of EBSA highlights the need to move beyond predominantly child-focused assessment towards more proactive and preventative activity at school and system levels (Melvin et al., 2019; Wagner, 2000). From this perspective, the Currie Matrix provides not only a descriptive framework for EP practice, but also a lens through which to critically examine how early identification is operationalised within school systems and where EP input may be under or over emphasised (NAPEP, 2026).

Through their involvement with schools and families, EPs can contribute to the development of shared conceptualisations and preventative frameworks. The literature highlights the value of EP involvement in supporting schools to interpret early indicators of distress and facilitate collaborative problem-solving (Sheridan & Kratochwill, 2007). From a professional doctorate perspective, this positions EP-led work in early identification as a key area for development and evaluation. Strengthening the operationalisation of early identification within school systems therefore aligns closely with the professional role and expertise of EPs.

1.4 Early Identification of EBSA: Evidence from the Literature

This section synthesises findings from studies identified through a semi-systematic review to examine how early identification of EBSA is conceptualised, operationalised, and evidenced within the existing literature in the UK. A semi-systematic approach was considered appropriate given the developing and conceptually varied nature of the literature relating to early EBSA, enabling relevant evidence to be identified and synthesised through a structured search process while accommodating variation in terminology, methodology and conceptualisation (Snyder, 2019). Collectively, these studies reflect growing recognition of the importance of early identification, while also highlighting limitations in the empirical base, particularly in relation to evaluated frameworks within UK practice contexts.

1.4.1 Identification of Studies

The articles included in this review were identified through systematic searches of the following databases: PsycINFO, Scopus, Web of Science, Applied Social Science Index and Abstracts (ASSIA), and Overton. Searches were conducted at two points in time, in August 2024 and April 2026, in order to capture both established and emerging literature. In addition, web-based searching was undertaken using Google Scholar, with searches continuing until saturation was reached and no new studies were identified.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to filter returned results (see Table 1). These criteria were designed to ensure relevance to the present study's focus on emotional barriers to school attendance within educational settings and from an educational psychology perspective.

Table 1

A Table Showing the Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria and Rationale for this Semi-Systematic Literature Review.

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria	Rationale
The article is published in a peer-reviewed journal, including educational psychology journals.	The article is not peer-reviewed (e.g. opinion pieces, blogs, unpublished reports) or is not published within a relevant academic journal.	To ensure the quality and credibility of included studies, and that findings are grounded in robust and ethically reviewed research relevant to the field of educational psychology.
The article focuses upon non-attendance or avoidance of an educational setting.	The article focuses upon non-attendance of another setting (hospital appointments, clinic appointments, etc.).	The focus of the present study is through the lens of educational psychology and is based on educational settings in the UK.

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria	Rationale
The article focuses on the non-attendance of primary school aged children and young people (4-11)	The study focuses on the non-attendance of young people either younger or older than primary school age.	The focus of the present study is on the early indicators and therefore CYP are most likely to be in primary or lower secondary settings.
The focus of the study is non-attendance with an emotional basis (EBSA, school refusal, school phobia, etc.).	The study does not describe the nature of non-attendance.	Non-attendance for purely medical, cultural or similar reasons are not the focus of the present study.
The study focuses on early identification, early indicators, or early-stage/emerging EBSA.	The study focuses on established, reintegration, or intervention-stage EBSA without reference to early identification or emerging indicators.	The present study is specifically concerned with early identification of EBSA.
Participants are school personnel, and/or parents of primary school-aged young people.	Participants are not school personnel or parents of school-aged young people.	The focus is on ecosystemic strength factors so there must be a direct relationship with the child.
Access to full text in the English language is available.	Access to full text is not available or is in a language other than English.	Quality of translation could not be assured.
To give an overview of perceptions of contemporary school systems, studies are published no earlier than 2010.	The study is published before the year 2010.	A shift in language and approach to school avoidance occurred around 2010 so this date range reflects this.

1.4.2 Search Strategy

The full list of search terms and the number of articles returned are detailed in Table 2. Search terms were intentionally broad in order to capture the range of terminology used within the literature to conceptualise EBSA. Given the lack of consistency in terminology, multiple terms were required to ensure relevant studies were not omitted. Truncation was used to capture variations in key terms; for example, “school refus*” encompassed both “school refusal” and “school refuser”.

1.4.3 Primary Searches

Initial scoping searches began with the terms “emotion* based school avoid*” OR “emotion* based school non-attend*”; however, these searches returned very few results, likely reflecting the relatively recent emergence of this terminology. In contrast, searches using historically more established terms (e.g., “school absen*”, “school refus*”, “truan*”) returned an unmanageably large number of results.

As a result, the primary search terms were refined to “school avoid*” OR “school non-attend*”, which returned a more appropriate volume of studies. These results were then refined through the researcher’s judgement to determine whether they reflected an emotion-based reason for school avoidance and therefore met the inclusion criteria. An additional ‘UK only’ filter was applied within Overton, as only UK legislation and government documentation were relevant to the present study.

Table 2

A Table to Show Search Terms Used, Databases Searched and Results Returned

Search term	Date	Library database	PsycINFO	Scopus	Web of Science	Applied Social Science Index and Abstract (ASSIA)	Overton (additional UK filter)
"emotion* based school avoid*" OR "emotion* based school	14.8.24	68	5	10	9	3	0

non-
attend**

"school avoid**" OR "school non- attend**"	14.8.24	887	132	195	166	199	17
"school absen**" OR "school refus**" OR "truan**"	14.8.24	21,638	1,552	2,962	3,159	63,335	2,035

Note. The highlighted row indicates the search terms that were chosen as a result of the scoping searches.

1.4.4 Secondary Searches

Secondary searches were subsequently conducted to address more specific research questions relating to early identification. These searches incorporated additional terms such as “early” and “transi**” alongside the primary search terms. The results of these searches are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

A Table Showing Secondary Search Terms Used, Databases Searched and Results Returned

Search term	Date	Library database	PsycINFO	Scopus	Web of Science	Applied Social Science Index and Abstract (ASSIA)	Overton (additional UK filter)
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"school avoid*" OR "school non- attend*" AND "transi*"	19.8.24	579	99	305	117	168	6
"school avoid*" OR "school non- attend*" AND "early"	19.8.24	60	104	634	124	184	11

Note. The highlighted row indicates the search terms that were chosen as a result of the initial searches.

1.4.5 Final Search Terms and Refinement

On the basis of the preliminary and secondary searches, the final search terms were confirmed as:

- "school avoid*" OR "school non-attend*" AND "early"

Searches were re-run at a second time point (April 2026) using these terms to ensure inclusion of newly published literature. No new studies were found to meet the inclusion criteria at this stage although it was noted that there were recent relevant doctoral theses and other publications.

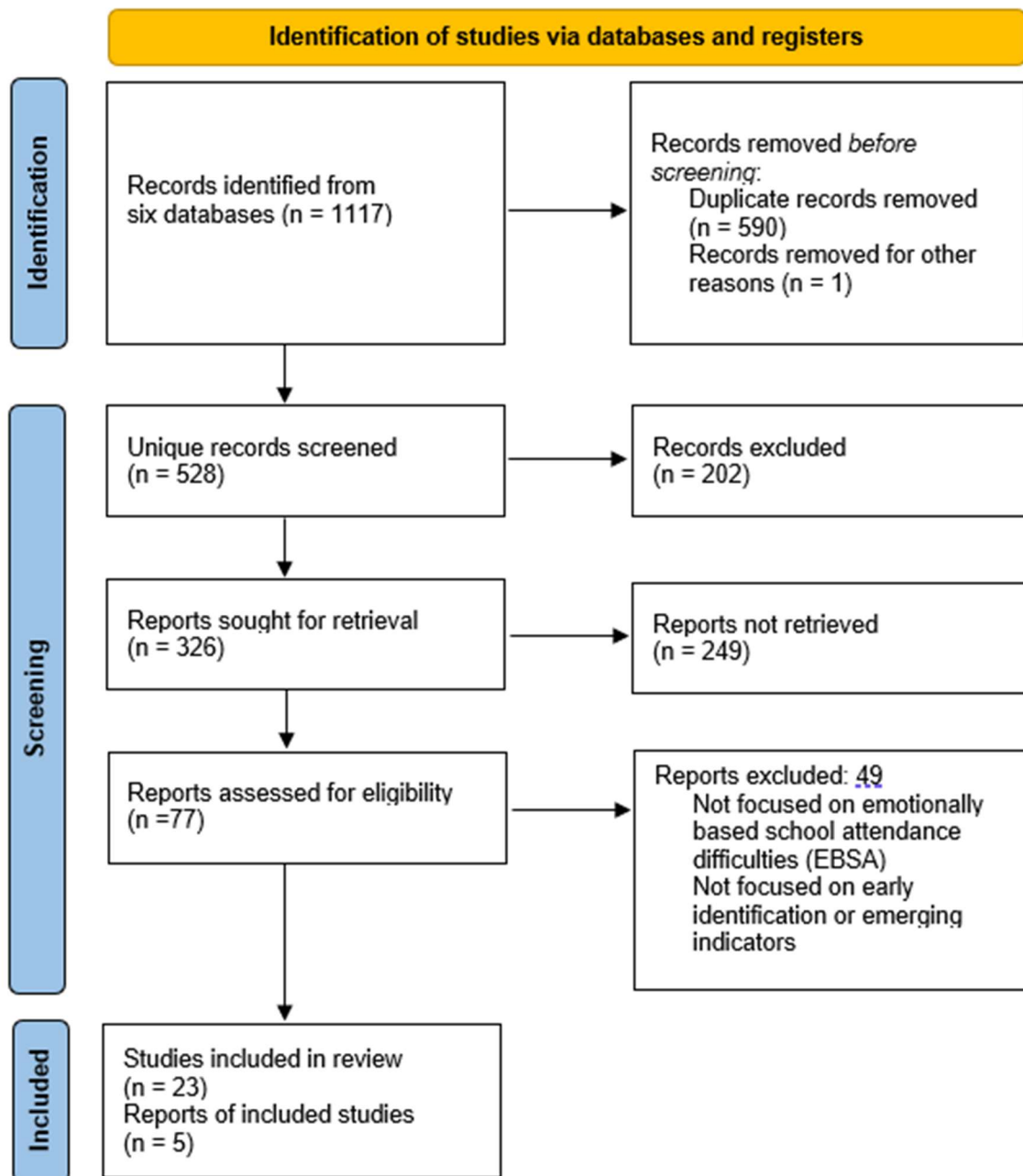
1.4.6 Study Selection

Applying the search strategy initially yielded 528 unique records. While this represents a relatively large number of papers, the search terms were left intentionally broad. This reflects the variability and rapidly evolving terminology within the field of EBSA, where inconsistent language may result in relevant studies being missed if overly restrictive search terms are used. As such, the decision was made not to further narrow the search at this stage, and instead to apply systematic

screening procedures to ensure that relevant studies were identified while maintaining a comprehensive overview of the literature. The PRISMA (Page et al., 2021) flow diagram was used to guide the screening and selection process (see Figure 3). Titles and abstracts were screened against the eligibility criteria, and articles not meeting these criteria were excluded. The remaining articles were then screened at full-text level, with further exclusions made where studies did not meet the inclusion criteria.

Figure 3

PRISMA (Page et al., 2021). A flow diagram showing the screening process of identified studies.



Following this process, five papers were identified as fully meeting the inclusion criteria for the review:

- Boaler et al. (2024). "The collaborative development of a local authority emotionally based school non-attendance (Ebsna) early identification tool." *Educational Psychology in Practice* 40(2): 185-200.
- Chu et al. (2019). "Developing an online early detection system for school attendance problems: results from a research-community partnership." *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice* 26(1): 35-45
- Chian et al. (2024). Emotional based school avoidance: Exploring school staff and pupil perspectives on provision in mainstream schools. *Educational and Child Psychology*, 41(1), 55-75.
- Cunningham et al. (2022) "School staffs' experiences of supporting children with school attendance difficulties in primary school: a qualitative study." *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties* 27(1): 72-87.
- Ingul et al. (2019). "Emerging school refusal: A school-based framework for identifying early signs and risk factors." *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice* 26(1): 46-62.

1.4.7 Overview of Included Studies

The five included studies reflect a mix of UK and international research and encompass qualitative, quantitative, and review methodologies. Collectively, they provide insight into early indicators of EBSA, ecological risk and protective factors, and approaches to early identification and intervention. Summaries of the included studies, including country, methodology, participant groups, aims, and key findings, are presented in Table 4.

Table 4*Summaries of Studies Included in the Review*

Citation	Country	Participants	Method	Aim	Key Findings
Boaler et al. (2024)	UK	Multi-agency professionals (n=9)	Qualitative (content analysis, focus group, interviews)	Develop early identification tool	Early identification most effective when collaborative and implemented before crisis; multi-agency approaches support prevention
Chian et al. (2024)	UK	School staff (n=6); pupils (n=7)	Qualitative (RTA; IPA)	Explore facilitators and barriers to EBSA support	Inclusive relationships support attendance; systemic barriers (e.g. resources, communication) limit effectiveness
Chu et al. (2019)	US	School administrators; multidisciplinary team	Mixed methods (survey; group development work)	Develop early identification system	Common predictors identified (e.g. age, SEN, family factors); supports early tracking of risk
Cunningham et al. (2022)	UK	Primary school staff (n=8)	Qualitative (thematic analysis)	Understand staff perspectives on early attendance difficulties	Early intervention and parental collaboration key to supporting attendance
Ingul et al. (2019)	Norway	Multiple studies (meta-analysis)	Systematic review	Identify early signs and risk factors	Early indicators include anxiety, somatic symptoms, and partial absence; risk accumulates across child, family, and school factors

1.4.8 Review Outcomes

The scoping process illustrated that, although there are numerous studies relating to school attendance difficulties, the majority focus on more established or active forms of EBSA, where patterns of non-attendance are already evident. In contrast, there is comparatively limited research exploring the early or emerging stages of EBSA behaviours. The included studies reflect a range of approaches to understanding attendance difficulties, including school-based systemic perspectives, explorations of professional perceptions, and meta-analyses of existing research. While some UK-based studies have begun to develop and pilot early identification and intervention frameworks, there remains limited evidence regarding their longer-term impact or effectiveness in practice.

1.4.9 Conceptualisations of Early Identification

Across the included studies, early identification is consistently framed as a preventative process aimed at recognising emerging emotional and contextual indicators before patterns of school non-attendance become entrenched (Boaler et al., 2024; Cunningham et al., 2022; Ingul et al., 2019). Rather than relying solely on attendance data, early identification is conceptualised as the recognition of changes in emotional presentation, behaviour, and engagement that may signal developing difficulties (Chu et al., 2019; Ingul et al., 2019). This perspective aligns with broader shifts away from reactive responses to persistent absence and towards earlier, needs-led intervention (Boaler et al., 2024; Cunningham et al., 2022). However, the literature reveals variation in how early identification is defined and operationalised (Boaler et al., 2024). While some studies focus explicitly on the development of identification tools (Boaler et al., 2024; Chu et al., 2019), others address it indirectly through risk factors or professional experiences (Chian et al., 2024; Cunningham et al., 2022; Ingul et al., 2019). This lack of conceptual consistency presents challenges for both research synthesis and practical implementation, as early identification is not uniformly distinguished from intervention or response (Boaler et al., 2024).

1.4.10 Indicators Associated with Emerging EBSA

Despite conceptual variability, there is notable convergence across the studies regarding indicators. Anxiety and anxiety-related symptoms, somatic

complaints, and emotional distress are consistently identified as central (Chu et al., 2019; Ingul et al., 2019). Patterns of partial attendance, intermittent absence, or increasing difficulty attending specific aspects of the school day are also highlighted as early behavioural indicators (Chu et al., 2019; Ingul et al., 2019). Ecological factors feature prominently, with risk factors spanning individual, familial, and school contexts (Boaler et al., 2024; Cunningham et al., 2022; Ingul et al., 2019). SEND, particularly autism, is identified as a significant vulnerability factor, closely linked to anxiety and increased sensitivity to school-based stressors (Boaler et al., 2024; Cunningham et al., 2022). These findings reinforce the view that early indicators of EBSA are rarely isolated and are best understood as emerging through interacting systems (Boaler et al., 2024; Ingul et al., 2019).

1.4.11 Professional Roles and Processes in Identification

The literature emphasises the role of professionals in noticing, interpreting, and responding to early indicators (Boaler et al., 2024; Ingul et al., 2019). Studies highlight the importance of shared understanding, collaboration, and reflective practice (Boaler et al., 2024; Cunningham et al., 2022). Where professionals adopt compassionate, child-centred conceptualisations, early signs of distress are more likely to be recognised (Chian et al., 2024; Cunningham et al., 2022). Conversely, inconsistent professional conceptualisations and fragmented systems are identified as barriers (Boaler et al., 2024; Chian et al., 2024). Where attendance difficulties are primarily viewed through behavioural or compliance-focused lenses, emotional indicators may be minimised or overlooked until absence becomes persistent (Boaler et al., 2024; Ingul et al., 2019). This tension underscores the need for frameworks that support professionals to integrate emotional, relational, and attendance-related information (Boaler et al., 2024; Ingul et al., 2019).

1.4.12 Early Identification Tools and Frameworks

The literature indicates that only a small number of studies within the review explicitly focus on the development of early identification tools or frameworks (Boaler et al., 2024; Chu et al., 2019). These studies describe collaborative systems designed to support professionals in recognising emerging EBSA (Boaler et al., 2024; Ingul et al., 2019). Findings suggest that co-produced tools, developed with

input from multiple stakeholders, are perceived as more contextually relevant and acceptable within practice settings (Boaler et al., 2024; Chu et al., 2019). However, there is limited empirical evidence regarding their long-term impact on attendance outcomes or emotional wellbeing (Boaler et al., 2024). Additionally, most identified tools have been developed within specific local or international contexts, with relatively few UK-based examples (Boaler et al., 2024). This limits the generalisability of findings and points to a need for further evaluation within UK education systems (Boaler et al., 2024; Chian et al., 2024).

1.5 Synthesis and Implications

The literature and professional guidance demonstrate a strong consensus regarding the importance of early identification in preventing entrenchment (Boaler et al., 2024; Ingul et al., 2019). However, professional guidance further strengthens the critique of current practice. NAPEP (2026) emphasises that early identification should not be evaluated solely through attendance outcomes, arguing that wellbeing, sense of belonging, and quality of relationships are critical indicators of success. This aligns with practice-based resources from the Barriers to Education project (2025), which advocate for reflective tools and collaborative processes that broaden identification beyond attendance metrics alone (Boaler et al., 2024; Cunningham et al., 2022). Together, the literature and professional guidance highlight a clear gap between conceptual agreement and operational practice (Boaler et al., 2024; Chian et al., 2024). While early identification is widely endorsed, there remains limited understanding of how it is enacted across systems, how professional judgement is applied, and how parents experience early-stage responses (Boaler et al., 2024; Cunningham et al., 2022).

1.6 Summary, Gaps, and Justification for the Present Study

This literature review has examined how EBSA is conceptualised, understood, and addressed, with particular attention to early identification. The reviewed literature highlights a clear shift towards compassionate, child-centred conceptualisations that foreground emotional distress and emphasise the interaction of child, family, and school-based factors. Ecological perspectives dominate current thinking, recognising

that EBSA develops through the accumulation and interaction of vulnerabilities across systems.

The synthesis of the semi-systematic review demonstrates strong consensus regarding the importance of early identification in preventing the escalation of attendance difficulties. Across the included studies, anxiety-related symptoms, somatic complaints, emerging patterns of partial attendance, and ecological risk factors are consistently identified as early indicators. Professional collaboration, positive family-school relationships, and shared conceptual understanding are highlighted as key protective factors.

Despite this convergence, the review identifies several significant gaps:

- **Lack of Evaluated Frameworks:** While early identification is widely advocated, there remains a lack of robust, empirically evaluated frameworks that support its systematic implementation within everyday school practice.
- **Retrospective Research:** Much of the available research focuses on identifying risk factors retrospectively, rather than examining how early indicators are recognised, interpreted, and acted upon in real-time.
- **Limited Evidence on Outcomes:** There is limited evidence regarding the long-term impact of early identification tools on attendance outcomes and emotional wellbeing.
- **Scarcity of UK-based Studies:** The lack of UK-based empirical studies is particularly notable, given the specific policy, professional, and systemic contexts within which attendance is addressed. Differences in statutory guidance and accountability structures limit the applicability of international findings to UK practice.
- **Transferability Issues:** Existing frameworks are often developed within isolated contexts, with limited exploration of their sustainability across local authority systems.

For professional practice, these gaps have important implications. EPs are well-positioned to support the development and implementation of early identification

approaches that integrate psychological understanding with systemic practice. However, there is a need for practice-based research that examines how early identification frameworks can be operationalised within local authority contexts, informed by professional judgement and ecological understanding.

The present study seeks to address these gaps by furthering the understanding of early EBSA within a UK local authority context. By adopting an ecological lens and focusing on early indicators of need, the study aims to contribute to the limited empirical evidence base. In doing so, it responds directly to the gaps identified in the literature and aligns with the professional doctorate's emphasis on applied research that informs and enhances professional practice.

Chapter 2: Empirical Paper

Abstract

Emotional Barriers to School Attendance (EBSA) are an increasingly significant concern within educational and psychological research, particularly in the context of school absence rates that have remained higher than pre-pandemic levels. This study addresses a gap in the literature by focusing on the early stages of EBSA within primary school contexts, where indicators are often subtle, fluctuating and not captured by attendance data alone. Grounded in an ecological framework, the research conceptualises EBSA as a dynamic, relational process shaped through interactions across child, family and school systems.

Adopting a critical realist framework, the study employed a multi-method design, drawing primarily on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews and a focus group with 12 primary school staff and two parents, alongside a supplementary survey completed by 12 parents. Participants had experience of early EBSA within primary school contexts. Qualitative data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.

Six themes were generated through the analysis: EBSA begins early and develops through subtle signs of distress; attendance difficulty reflects unmet need and environmental factors; relational safety is a core protective factor; primary schools sustain attendance through flexible, relational adaptation; family experience is central to EBSA; and transition and systems can amplify risk. Collectively, these themes suggest that early EBSA may be understood as a gradual and relational process, shaped through the interaction of individual need, family experience, school relationships and wider systemic factors.

The study highlights the importance of early identification, relational approaches and system-level responsiveness. A key contribution is the development of the SENSE framework, which integrates these findings into a practical model for recognising and responding to early EBSA. Overall, the research contributes to a more ecologically and relationally informed understanding of EBSA.

2.1 Introduction

As outlined in the literature review, Emotional Barriers to School Attendance (EBSA) is increasingly recognised as a significant concern within both research and practice, particularly in the context of rising school absence rates following the COVID-19 pandemic (Lester & Michelson, 2024). National data indicate that levels of persistent absence have not returned to pre-pandemic levels, with a notable increase in children experiencing difficulties attending school (DfE, 2024b). However, while these figures highlight the scale of the issue, they do not fully capture the complexity of the experiences underlying non-attendance. Attendance data alone may overlook the relational, emotional and contextual factors that shape children's engagement with school, particularly in cases where distress is present, but attendance has not yet significantly declined.

Within this context, EBSA has emerged as a key area of focus for educational psychology services and wider children's services, reflecting both the complexity of attendance difficulties and their impact on children and families (Heyne et al., 2020). At the same time, it is important to consider how EBSA is understood within school systems shaped by expectations around attendance, accountability and performance. While these systems play a necessary role in monitoring attendance, a predominant focus on quantitative data may obscure the experiences of children whose needs are not yet visible within formal thresholds.

As highlighted in the literature review, much of the existing research has focused on older children and young people (CYP), often at the point where patterns of non-attendance are more entrenched and intervention becomes reactive rather than preventative (Lester & Michelson, 2024; McDonald & Pervez, 2025). There remains a relative gap in understanding the earlier stages of EBSA, particularly within primary school contexts where signs of difficulty may be subtle, intermittent, or context-dependent (Heyne et al., 2019; Kearney, 2008). These early indicators may not be recognised within existing systems, particularly where attendance remains relatively high, but may nevertheless reflect emerging vulnerability.

This study seeks to address this gap by exploring how early indicators of EBSA are experienced, interpreted and responded to by those closest to the child, including parents and school staff. By focusing on early identification, the study

aligns with calls within both research and policy to move away from a ‘wait to fail’ model of attendance intervention, towards more proactive and preventative approaches (DfE, 2024b; Kearney & Graczyk, 2014; Lester & Michelson, 2024). It is important to consider how such approaches can be supported within practice, particularly in recognising early signs of difficulty before patterns of non-attendance become more established.

To reflect the complexity of EBSA, the study adopts an ecological perspective, recognising that school attendance is shaped by the interaction of multiple factors across child, family and school systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Kearney, 2008). This perspective supports an understanding of EBSA as a relational and context-dependent process, rather than an issue located solely within the child. It also highlights the importance of considering how different systems interact, including how communication and shared understanding between family and school may influence how early difficulties are recognised and responded to.

This is particularly relevant for EPs, who often work across these systems and are well positioned to support the development of shared understanding between families and schools. Taking an ecological perspective allows for a more holistic consideration of children’s experiences, recognising both the individual and systemic factors that may contribute to EBSA.

To reflect this, the methodological approach prioritises the inclusion of key stakeholder perspectives and seeks to understand how EBSA is constructed and experienced within real-world contexts. The study focuses on parent and school staff accounts, recognising their central role in observing, interpreting and responding to early indicators of difficulty across family and school systems. While children’s voices are widely acknowledged as essential within research on school attendance (Havik et al., 2015a), they were not directly included in this study. This decision was made in light of the study’s focus on very early and often subtle experiences of anxiety, which may be difficult for younger children to articulate and may risk causing distress or reinforcing anxious feelings if explored directly. Instead, parent and staff perspectives were used to capture how these early indicators are noticed and understood in practice, providing insight into the relational and contextual processes through which EBSA begins to emerge.

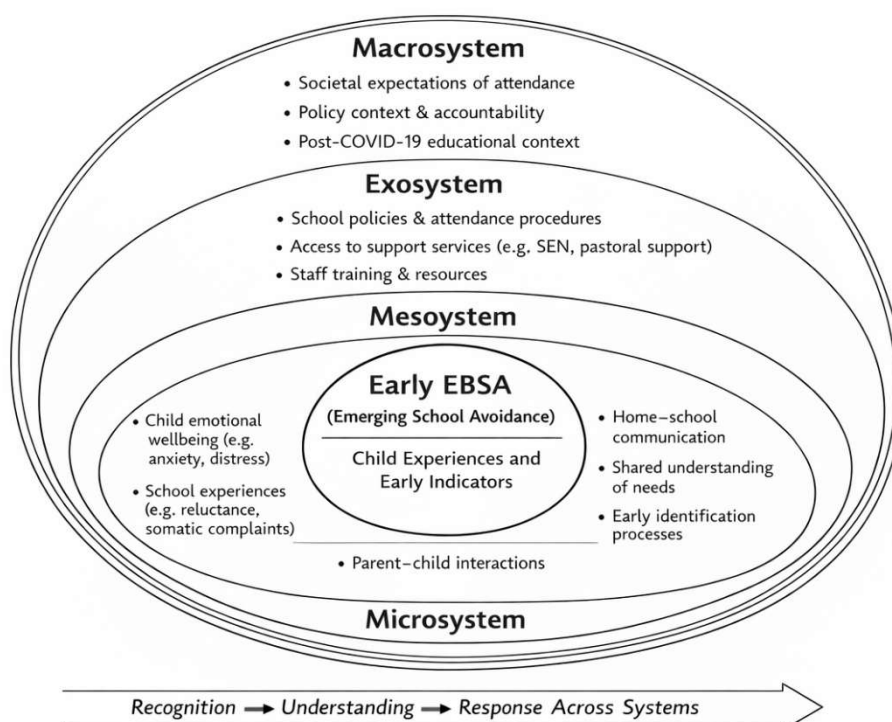
2.1.1 An Ecological Understanding of EBSA

This study is underpinned by an ecological understanding of EBSA, recognising that children's experiences of school attendance are influenced by interactions across multiple systems. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), EBSA is conceptualised not as a difficulty located solely within the child, but as a process that emerges through the interaction between individual, relational and contextual factors.

Figure 4 illustrates how early EBSA may develop within primary school contexts through these interacting systems. At the centre of the model is the child's experience of early EBSA, including emerging emotional and behavioural indicators such as anxiety, distress, or reluctance to attend school. Surrounding this, the microsystem captures proximal influences, including relationships within the family and experiences within the classroom. These everyday interactions play a key role in shaping how children experience school, particularly in relation to feelings of safety, belonging and emotional wellbeing.

Figure 4

Ecological Systems Model of Early EBSA in Primary School Contexts



The mesosystem reflects the connections between these immediate contexts, most notably the relationship between family and school. Communication, shared understanding and consistency in responses are particularly important at this level, as they may influence how early indicators of EBSA are recognised and interpreted. Where there is alignment between systems, early support may be more effectively coordinated. Conversely, differences in understanding or expectations may contribute to delays in recognition or fragmented responses.

Beyond this, the exosystem includes wider structural influences such as school policies, staff training and access to support services. These factors shape how schools are able to respond to emerging difficulties, including the extent to which early identification is prioritised within practice. The macrosystem reflects broader societal and policy influences, including expectations around school attendance and the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. These wider influences may shape how EBSA is understood within systems, as well as the pressures experienced by schools and families in responding to attendance concerns.

Overall, this ecological framing suggests that EBSA may be understood in relation to the combined effects of several factors interacting across different systems. This perspective is central to the current study, which seeks to understand how early indicators of EBSA are recognised, understood and responded to within real-world contexts.

2.1.2 Risk and Resilience: Push and Pull Factors

This ecological perspective aligns with existing research which conceptualises EBSA as shaped by interacting risk and resilience factors across family, school and child domains (Havik et al., 2014; Pellegrini, 2007). The interaction of these influences has also been conceptualised within practice-based EBSA guidance through ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors, reflecting influences which may make school more difficult to attend or draw a child towards remaining at home (WSCC, 2022). Within the current study, this conceptualisation provides a useful way of understanding the dynamic processes that may shape children’s engagement with school.

Push factors may include experiences that make school more difficult to attend, such as anxiety, peer difficulties, or academic pressures. In contrast, pull factors may include influences that draw a child towards home, such as separation anxiety, family dynamics, or a perceived sense of safety within the home environment. It is important to recognise that these factors do not operate independently. Rather than acting in isolation, they interact across systems and it is the cumulative and shifting relationship between them that shapes a child's experience of school attendance.

From an ecological perspective, interactions across the systems surrounding the child mean that changes within one area may have wider implications across others (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For some children, this may result in early indicators of difficulty emerging before patterns of non-attendance become established. In this way, EBSA can be understood as existing along a spectrum of need, where early behaviours may not immediately meet thresholds for concern but may nevertheless reflect underlying vulnerability (DfE, 2024b; Havik et al., 2015b).

This conceptualisation is particularly important within the current context of rising school absence, where early patterns of disengagement may become entrenched over time if not recognised and responded to. Within this study, these early experiences are understood in terms of interacting risk and resilience factors across child, family and school contexts, providing a framework for identifying where vulnerability may increase or be mitigated. The current study therefore focuses on these early indicators, with the aim of supporting more timely and preventative responses within school systems.

2.1.3 EBSA as a Spectrum and the Importance of Early Identification

Consistent with this perspective, EBSA is understood within this study as a spectrum of experiences, rather than a binary distinction between attendance and non-attendance. This reflects earlier conceptualisations of school attendance difficulties which challenged categorical distinctions between different forms of non-attendance and recognised that children may present with overlapping patterns of difficulty (Lauchlan, 2003). Children may demonstrate a range of early behaviours associated with EBSA, including reluctance to attend school, distress at points of

transition, partial attendance, or increased anxiety linked to school routines (Kearney, 2008; Kearney & Albano, 2004).

These behaviours are often context-dependent and may fluctuate over time. As such, they may not always be recognised as indicators of difficulty within school systems, particularly where attendance remains relatively high and concerns are interpreted primarily through attendance thresholds (DfE, 2024b; Havik et al., 2015b). However, these behaviours may represent early signs of emotional distress or emerging difficulties within the interaction of systems surrounding the child (Heyne et al., 2020; Pellegrini, 2007). Ecological approaches, including applications of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, have previously been used within published and practice-based literature to understand EBSA and related school attendance difficulties across the systems surrounding the child (Leduc et al., 2024; McDonald & Pervez, 2025; WSCC, 2022). The current study builds on this existing ecological understanding through its particular focus on early EBSA and the interaction between home and school.

This aligns with concerns within the literature regarding a 'wait to fail' approach, where support is often delayed until attendance difficulties become more pronounced (Heyne et al., 2020; Kearney & Graczyk, 2014). By the time thresholds for intervention are met, difficulties may already be more entrenched, shaped by ongoing interactions across family, school and wider systems and therefore more complex to address (Havik et al., 2015b; McDonald & Pervez, 2025).

By focusing on early indicators, the current study seeks to contribute to a more preventative understanding of EBSA, supporting earlier recognition, interpretation and response within school contexts (DfE, 2024b; Kearney & Graczyk, 2014).

2.1.4 Relational and Emotional Dimensions

While ecological and systemic perspectives provide an important framework for understanding EBSA, it is equally important to consider the relational and emotional processes through which these influences are experienced. Within the microsystem, relationships between children and significant adults play a central role

in shaping children's engagement with school, influencing both their sense of safety and their capacity to manage emotional demands associated with attendance.

Feelings of safety, belonging and connection are consistently identified as key protective factors within the literature, supporting children's ability to attend and remain in school (Havik et al., 2015a; Kearney & Graczyk, 2014). Conversely, experiences of anxiety, disconnection, or perceived lack of understanding may contribute to avoidance, particularly where children feel that their emotional needs are not recognised or responded to within the school environment (Finning et al., 2019; Heyne et al., 2019). Research highlights that difficulties with peer relationships, limited sense of belonging and challenges within student-teacher relationships may all exacerbate experiences of EBSA, reinforcing patterns of withdrawal from school (Brown, 2024; Havik et al., 2015b).

Importantly, these relational processes do not occur in isolation within a single context. Rather, they operate across family and school systems, often influencing one another in dynamic and reciprocal ways (Epstein, 2018). For example, a child's anxiety may be shaped by experiences of separation from caregivers, while difficulties encountered within school may impact emotional wellbeing within the home (Heyne et al., 2019; Kearney & Silverman, 1990). In this way, EBSA can be understood as emerging through interactions across systems, rather than residing solely within the child (Ingul et al., 2019; Melvin et al., 2019). This is consistent with ecological accounts which emphasise the interaction between individual, relational and environmental factors in shaping school attendance (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Melvin et al., 2019).

The role of relationships between parents/carers and school staff is particularly significant within this process. Where there is shared understanding, open communication and collaborative problem-solving, these partnerships may support earlier identification and more effective responses to emerging difficulties (Epstein, 2018; Sheridan & Kratochwill, 2007). However, where communication is limited or characterised by misunderstanding or blame, this may contribute to delays in support and reinforce difficulties in attendance (Heyne et al., 2019; Kearney & Silverman, 1990). Research has highlighted how differing perspectives between families and schools can create tensions, with each system at times locating the

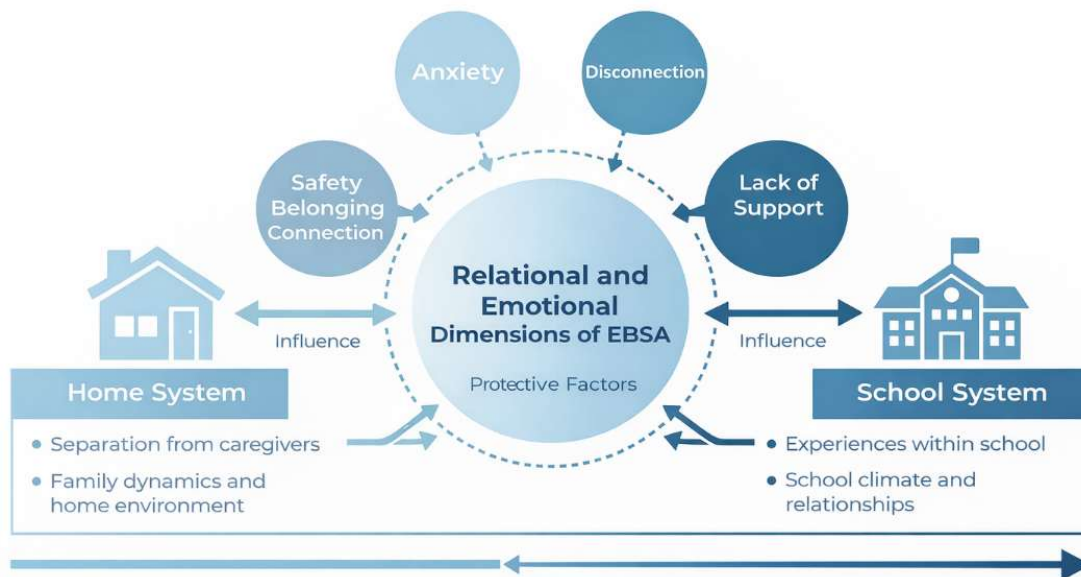
cause' of EBSA elsewhere, thereby complicating coordinated responses (Cooper, 2024; Elliott & Place, 2019; Havik et al., 2015a). Similarly, wider research has emphasised that strong family-school relationships are a key predictor of improved attendance, particularly where emotional needs underpin non-attendance (Ingul et al., 2019; McDonald & Pervez, 2025).

This aligns with emerging academic research and practice-based evidence which emphasises the importance of mutual understanding and partnership working in supporting children experiencing barriers to attendance (NAPEP, 2026; Sawyer & Collingwood, 2024). Approaches which prioritise listening to the child's experience, validating parental perspectives and fostering collaborative relationships between family and school are increasingly recognised as central to effective early intervention (DfE, 2024b). Such approaches move away from deficit-based or punitive models of attendance, instead foregrounding relational trust and shared meaning-making as the basis for support (Barriers to Education, 2025; Heyne et al., 2019).

This positions EBSA as a relational phenomenon (Figure 5), embedded within ongoing interactions between children, families and schools. Supporting attendance therefore involves more than addressing individual behaviours; it requires strengthening the relational contexts in which children experience school, so that they feel understood, supported and able to engage.

Figure 5

Relational Processes Across Family and School Systems Contribute to EBSA



2.1.5 Theoretical Framework

The research is further underpinned by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which demonstrates how a child is situated within broader social, cultural and institutional contexts. This is particularly important in the exploration of EBSA when holding in mind the multiple interacting systems which may influence it. These systems may hold differing understandings of EBSA and capturing these perspectives provides a valuable way of drawing together multiple viewpoints to develop a richer and more holistic understanding of the phenomenon.

Bronfenbrenner's later work developed ecological systems theory into the bioecological model, placing greater emphasis on proximal processes and the interaction between Process, Person, Context and Time (PPCT) (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). While these later developments are acknowledged, the full PPCT model was not applied within the current study. The earlier ecological systems theory was considered more appropriate to the aims of the research because the study focused specifically on understanding early EBSA across interacting systems surrounding the child, with particular attention to the relationship between home and school within the mesosystem.

This ecological framing is consistent with the study's critical realist positioning, as it supports exploration of both the underlying mechanisms which may shape EBSA across interacting systems and the different meanings individuals construct within those contexts (Elder-Vass, 2012; Fletcher, 2017).

2.1.6 Implications for the Current Study

The theoretical framework outlined above directly informs both the design and focus of the current study, supporting alignment between the study's conceptual underpinnings and its methodological approach.

Firstly, it supports the inclusion of multiple participant groups, recognising that EBSA is experienced across interacting systems and may be understood differently within these contexts. The inclusion of both parents and school staff enables exploration of how early indicators are perceived, interpreted and responded to within home and school environments. This reflects research which highlights that differing perspectives across systems can shape both understanding and response to attendance difficulties and may at times contribute to misalignment or fragmented support (Cooper, 2024; Kearney, 2008). Bringing these perspectives together therefore supports a more integrated understanding of early EBSA, consistent with research highlighting the importance of collaboration and shared understanding across systems (DfE, 2024b; Havik et al., 2015b).

Secondly, the framework informs the study's focus on early identification, emphasising the importance of recognising how difficulties may emerge over time and how they may be interpreted differently across contexts before patterns of non-attendance become more established. This aligns with wider literature which highlights the need for earlier, preventative approaches to EBSA, given that intervention is often delayed until difficulties have become more entrenched and complex to address (Heyne et al., 2020; Kearney & Graczyk, 2014; Kearney, 2008; McDonald & Pervez, 2025). Attending to early and often subtle, indicators within both family and school contexts is therefore central to the study's design.

This chapter outlines the empirical study conducted to explore early Emotional Barriers to School Attendance (EBSA) within primary school contexts. Consistent with the overall focus of the study on recognising and responding to early EBSA, the

research was designed to develop a nuanced understanding of how early indicators are experienced, interpreted and responded to across family and school systems. In doing so, the study draws on the perspectives of both parents and school staff, recognising that EBSA is shaped through interactions between these contexts.

The chapter begins by presenting the research questions, followed by a detailed account of the methodological approach, including research design, participants and data collection methods. The findings are then presented, before being considered in relation to existing literature within the discussion. The chapter concludes by summarising key insights and their implications for understanding and responding to early EBSA, with particular emphasis on early identification and preventative intervention.

2.2 Research Questions

In order to address the aims of this study, the following research questions were developed to explore the recognition, understanding and response to early EBSA in primary school-aged children within primary school contexts:

1. How are early signs of EBSA recognised in primary school-aged children?
2. How do parents and staff understand children's early experiences of EBSA?
3. How do schools respond to early EBSA and what supports effective early intervention?

These questions reflect a progression from identification to interpretation and response, aligning with the study's ecological focus on how EBSA is experienced and addressed across family and school systems.

2.3 Methods

2.3.1 Ontological and Epistemological Positioning

The ontological and epistemological positioning of this study is grounded within a critical realist framework. A critical realist position assumes that a reality exists independently of how individuals understand or describe it, while also recognising that our knowledge of this reality is shaped by our experiences and the social and cultural contexts in which these occur (Elder-Vass, 2012; Willig, 2013).

This positioning reflects the complex and multi-layered nature of EBSA and supports the study's aim of exploring both the wider mechanisms which may influence EBSA and how these are understood by parents and school staff.

Within a critical realist ontology, experiences of this reality may be shaped by social, cultural, ethnic, economic and political factors (Willig, 2013). Within the context of EBSA, the subject of school avoidance is inherently tied to societal structures and expectations; to avoid school implies that there is an expectation that CYP will attend. As such, school attendance can be understood as a socially structured expectation embedded within educational systems, policy frameworks and cultural norms (Kearney et al., 2022).

Adopting a critical realist perspective highlights the complex contexts within which schools operate and allows for consideration of both observable and less visible aspects of EBSA. At an observable level, this includes patterns of attendance, avoidance behaviours and engagement with school routines. However, this position also supports exploration of underlying mechanisms, including emotional factors such as anxiety, as well as relational and systemic influences that may shape children's experiences of school (Archer et al., 2013). These mechanisms are not viewed in isolation, but as operating within broader contextual systems, including family dynamics, school practices and wider societal influences (Archer et al., 2013; Kearney & Albano, 2004).

Within this critical realist position, it is also recognised that individuals actively construct their own understanding of their experiences and that knowledge is shaped through social interaction and experience (Crotty, 1998). From this perspective, knowledge is not understood as providing direct or objective access to reality but is influenced by the social and cultural contexts in which it is constructed. Language is central to this process, as it influences how experiences are understood, communicated and given meaning. The way in which individuals perceive and respond to their environment is therefore influenced by the cultural constructs and experiences they bring to it (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009).

Within the context of EBSA, this is particularly relevant, as different stakeholders, including children, parents and school staff, may hold differing understandings of the same experiences. For example, what may be noticed within a

school context as ‘non-attendance’ may be experienced by a child as overwhelming anxiety or understood by a parent as emotional distress (Heyne et al., 2019; Kearney, 2008). Recognising these different perspectives allows for exploration of the meanings individuals attach to their experiences without assuming that any single account provides complete or objective access to the experience. This is particularly relevant to the current study, which draws on the perspectives of parents and school staff to develop an understanding of how early EBSA is recognised and understood across home and school contexts.

A critical realist framework therefore provides a coherent position for this study. It enables consideration of the underlying structures and mechanisms which may influence EBSA, while also recognising that individuals construct different understandings of their experiences across contexts. This positioning is particularly suited to EBSA, as it reflects the interaction between individual experiences and the wider systems in which they occur. It is also consistent with the use of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), where themes are actively developed through the researcher’s engagement with the data rather than viewed as existing independently within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This allows patterns of meaning across participants’ accounts to be interpreted, while acknowledging the active role of the researcher in developing those interpretations.

2.4 Research Design

2.4.1 Participants and Sampling

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit participants with direct experience of EBSA within primary school contexts. This approach prioritised relevance and depth of insight over representativeness, reflecting the study’s focus on exploring patterns of meaning rather than producing generalisable findings (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Three schools from the locality were selected based on their active engagement in supporting children with attendance-related difficulties. While this ensured that participants were able to draw on meaningful and practice-based experiences, it also introduced potential limitations. In particular, the focus on schools already engaged with EBSA may have resulted in a sample that was more

informed or proactive than average, potentially limiting the extent to which findings reflect wider variability in practice.

Access to the first school was facilitated through existing professional relationships, with additional schools recruited subsequently. While this supported feasibility and access, it also raises considerations regarding researcher positionality and the potential influence of prior relationships on both recruitment and data generation. These dynamics were considered throughout the research process, particularly in relation to maintaining openness in participant responses.

Data collection across schools occurred in parallel, allowing for exploration across multiple contexts (Table 5). However, the relatively small number of participating schools necessarily limits the transferability of findings, reinforcing the importance of interpreting results within their specific contextual boundaries.

Table 5

Overview of School Type and Size

School identifier	Type of school	School category	Age range of pupils	Gender of pupils	Number of pupils on roll
A	Primary	Academy	3 to 11	Mixed	419
B	Primary	Community	3 to 11	Mixed	316
C	Primary	Academy	4 to 11	Mixed	178

Participants were drawn from two groups: parents/carers and school staff. This decision was grounded in the recognition that EBSA is inherently relational and systemic, with experiences shaped across both home and school contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Havik et al., 2015b). Including both groups therefore enabled exploration of the mesosystemic relationship between two of the key contexts surrounding the child.

Drawing on these perspectives enabled the study to capture both convergences and divergences in how early indicators are recognised and

interpreted. However, it is important to acknowledge that these perspectives are not equivalent. Parents and school staff occupy different roles within the child's ecological system, and their accounts are shaped by distinct forms of access, responsibility and interpretation. As such, differences in perspective were not treated as discrepancies to be resolved, but as meaningful reflections of the complexity of EBSA across contexts.

Inclusion criteria focused on early indicators rather than established patterns of non-attendance (Table 6). While this supports the study's focus on early identification, it also introduces ambiguity regarding thresholds for inclusion, as experiences of EBSA may vary considerably in their presentation and severity.

Table 6

Participant Inclusion Criteria

Participant Group	Inclusion Criteria
Parents/Carers	• Had a child of primary school age • Child experienced anxiety, distress, or reluctance related to attending school • Had concerns about their child's attendance or emotional wellbeing in relation to school
School Staff	• Currently working within a primary school setting • Had experience of supporting children with attendance-related difficulties or EBSA

2.4.2 Recruitment

Participants were recruited through schools, with the schools acting as gatekeepers to both staff and families. Schools distributed recruitment posters (Appendix C) through their normal communication channels e.g. newsletters, emails, social media, physical display. This approach facilitated access for the researcher and ensured that recruitment was embedded within familiar and trusted systems.

However, the use of gatekeepers also introduces potential constraints, including the possibility that participation may be shaped by school-level decisions regarding which individuals are invited or feel able to engage.

Participation was voluntary and informed, which was crucial due to the sensitivity of discussing children's emotional wellbeing. Despite these measures, it is recognised that recruitment through schools may carry implicit power dynamics which could influence participants' perceptions of choice.

2.4.3 Participant Sample

In total, fourteen participants contributed to the qualitative component of the study. This included four online interviews with members of school leadership, six in-person interviews (one headteacher, three support staff members and two parents), and one focus group with four participants drawn from teaching and support staff within the same school. Some staff participants also contributed from their dual perspective as parents of children who had experienced EBSA ($n = 3$), further enriching the data by bridging family and school contexts. In addition, twelve parents completed the survey, which was intended to provide a broader overview of patterns across participants and to frame the qualitative work.

Table 7 below summarises the participants' roles alongside their pseudonym.

Table 7

Participant Role, Pseudonymisation and Method of Data Collection

Pseudonym	Role	Method of data collection
A1	SENCo	Online interview
A2	Attendance Lead	Online interview
A3	Teaching Assistant	In-person interview
A4	Teaching Assistant and parent	In-person interview
A5	Teaching Assistant/ Thrive Practitioner	In-person interview
B1	SENCo	Online interview
B2	Head teacher	Online interview
C1	Head teacher/ SENCo	In-person interview

C2	Learning Support Assistant and parent	Focus group
C3	Learning Support Assistant and parent	Focus group
C4	Teaching Assistant/ ELSA	Focus group
C5	Class Teacher (Early Years)/ Thrive Practitioner	Focus group
P1	Parent	In-person interview
P2	Parent	In-person interview

Note. Participant pseudonyms indicate the context from which participants were recruited. A, B and C refer to the three participating schools, with the accompanying number identifying individual participants within each setting. P refers to parent participants who took part independently of the staff participant coding.

2.5 Data Collection

Data were collected through a parent survey, semi-structured interviews and focus groups with parents and school staff. Appendix B gives an overview of data collection methods.

The study was originally designed as a two-part research process. The first part involved a parent survey, which was intended to provide a broader overview of early experiences of EBSA and offered parents the opportunity to indicate whether they would be willing to participate in a subsequent qualitative interview. The second part involved qualitative interviews and focus groups, which were designed to explore participants' experiences and understandings in greater depth. The survey therefore had both a contextual and recruitment function within the original research design, rather than being intended as a separate quantitative strand. As the research progressed, the limited survey response meant that greater emphasis was placed on the qualitative data, with the survey retained as a source of contextual information. Further reflection on the development of the original two-part design and the role of the survey is provided in Chapter 3 (Section 3.3).

2.5.1 Parent Survey

A parent survey (Appendix D) was designed to capture structured insights into early indicators of EBSA, drawing on the Trafford Early Identification of Needs

framework (Boaler et al., 2024) and conceptualisations of risk and resilience from the EBSA Horizons materials (Holder, 2022; Hounslow, 2022). It consisted of demographic items and Likert-scale questions, focusing on individual areas such as the child's emotional wellbeing, family context and school-related experiences.

While the structured nature of the survey allowed for focused data collection, the limited response rate significantly constrained its analytic value. As a result, the survey was not used to generate generalisable findings but instead contributed to the broader contextual understanding of the study. This shows a limitation in the use of more structured tools within this research context, particularly where engagement may be influenced by time and accessibility.

2.5.2 Interviews

In order to capture both individual experiences and shared professional understandings, a combination of individual interviews (with parents and some staff) and small focus group interviews (with school staff) was used. This combined approach enabled access to a broader range of participants and perspectives than would have been possible through a single method alone. It also supported the inclusion of participants within the practical constraints of school settings, where staff availability was often limited. Importantly, this approach allowed the study to capture both personal, context-specific experiences (through individual interviews) and more collective, system-level perspectives (through group discussion), reflecting the ecological focus of the research.

Focus groups were not included within the original research design, which initially intended to use individual interviews for the qualitative component. Their inclusion developed in response to practical considerations relating to staff availability within the school context; support staff were more readily released to participate together at times when their roles could be covered. A focus group therefore provided a pragmatic means of enabling support staff to participate in the research. In addition to addressing these practical considerations, the group format provided an opportunity to explore shared professional understandings and experiences, as participants were able to respond to and build upon each other's accounts. This complemented the individual interviews, which enabled more detailed exploration of individual and context-specific perspectives.

Semi-structured interviews formed the primary method of data collection, offering a flexible and responsive approach to exploring participants' experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). This method aligned with the study's epistemological positioning, as it enabled participants to share their perspectives in their own words, while also allowing the researcher to explore areas of interest in greater depth through prompts and follow-up questions (Robson & McCartan, 2016). In this way, interviews supported the development of rich and detailed accounts of how EBSA was experienced, understood and responded to across contexts.

Individual interviews were conducted either in person or online, depending on participant preference and availability. This flexibility supported accessibility and participation, which was an important consideration given the demands on both parents and school staff. However, it is recognised that the use of different formats may have introduced some variability within the data collection process. For example, online interviews may limit access to non-verbal cues and influence the development of rapport, while in-person interviews may facilitate more natural interaction (Opdenakker, 2006). These differences were considered during both data collection and analysis.

Focus group interviews were conducted in person with school staff, providing an opportunity to explore shared understandings and collective approaches to supporting children experiencing EBSA. The group format enabled participants to build on one another's contributions, often generating discussion and reflection that may not have emerged within individual interviews (Morgan, 1996). This was particularly valuable in exploring how practices were shaped within school systems, as well as how staff made sense of EBSA within their professional contexts.

At the same time, it is important to recognise that group-based interviews introduce methodological considerations. Group dynamics may influence participation, with some voices shaping the direction of discussion more strongly than others. There is also the possibility that participants may moderate their responses in the presence of colleagues, particularly where experiences relate to shared practice or organisational processes (Smithson, 2000). These factors were considered during facilitation, with efforts made to create a supportive and inclusive environment and were also taken into account during analysis.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Online interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams and transcribed using the platform's transcription function, while in-person interviews were transcribed using Microsoft Word. All transcripts were checked manually against the recordings to ensure accuracy and to support familiarisation with the data.

2.5.3 Interview and Focus Group Schedules

Semi-structured interview and focus group schedules were developed by the researcher to guide discussion while allowing flexibility to respond to participants' experiences (Appendix E). Consistent with the iterative nature of qualitative research, these guide questions were adapted over the course of the study (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009).

The development of the schedules was informed by existing literature and practice-based frameworks, including the Trafford framework (Boaler et al., 2024) and previous research in this area (Chian, 2022). This supported a balance between grounding the study within existing knowledge and remaining open to new and unexpected aspects of participants' experiences.

2.5.4 Reflexive Field Notes

Reflexive field notes were maintained throughout the research process, capturing observations, initial interpretations and reflections on the researcher's role (Appendix F). This supported ongoing critical engagement with the data, including consideration of how interpretations were shaped through interaction between the researcher and participants. Such reflexive practice is consistent with reflexive thematic analysis, which positions the researcher as actively involved in the construction of meaning rather than as a neutral observer (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Maintaining reflexive notes therefore supported a more transparent and critically informed analytic process, enabling ongoing awareness of how assumptions, experiences and contextual factors may have influenced interpretation.

2.5.5 Data Collection Summary

Data were collected using a multi-method design, comprising a parent survey, semi-structured individual interviews, and focus group interviews with school staff.

These methods were implemented in a parallel and iterative manner, allowing insights generated through one method to inform subsequent data collection and supporting a more comprehensive exploration of early indicators of EBSA across family and school contexts.

Semi-structured interviews formed the primary source of data, providing rich, in-depth accounts of participants' experiences. A combination of individual interviews and focus group interviews was used to capture both personal perspectives and shared professional understandings. This approach enabled access to a broader range of participants and supported the inclusion of school staff within the practical constraints of educational settings. It also aligned with the ecological focus of the study, allowing exploration of EBSA as both an individual and system-level phenomenon.

A parent survey was initially included to gather structured contextual information regarding early indicators of EBSA. However, due to a limited response rate, the survey data were used descriptively to inform contextual understanding rather than as a primary source of analysis. This reflects a limitation in the use of structured tools within this research context, where engagement may be influenced by time, accessibility and the sensitivity of the topic.

Across all methods, flexibility was prioritised to support participation. Interviews were conducted both in person and online, and focus groups were facilitated within school settings. While this enhanced accessibility, it is acknowledged that variation in data collection formats may have influenced the nature of the data, particularly in relation to rapport and non-verbal communication.

All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were checked manually against recordings to ensure accuracy and to support familiarisation with the data. In addition, reflexive field notes were maintained throughout the data collection process, capturing contextual observations and supporting ongoing critical reflection on the researcher's role in the co-construction of meaning.

2.6 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using a combination of descriptive statistical analysis and qualitative reflexive thematic analysis, reflecting the different forms of data generated within the study. Survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics to provide a contextual view of parental experiences, while interview and focus group data formed the primary basis for in-depth qualitative analysis.

Descriptive statistics were used to summarise survey responses. Given the relatively small number of responses ($n = 12$), the survey data were used to provide contextual insight rather than to support generalisable conclusions.

Qualitative data from interviews and focus groups were analysed using RTA, following the six-phase process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022) (Appendix G). This method was selected for its flexibility and its compatibility with the study's critical realist positioning, allowing for exploration of participants' accounts and the broader patterns and processes reflected within these accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Seddon, 2024).

Consistent with RTA, analysis was understood as a recursive rather than linear process, with movement between phases as interpretations developed (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The six phases therefore provided a structure for analysis rather than a fixed sequence of steps. Appendix G provides further illustration of the analytic process, including examples showing the development from participant extracts to initial codes and subthemes.

Familiarisation involved sustained engagement with the qualitative data. Interview and focus group recordings were transcribed verbatim and transcripts were checked manually against the original recordings. Transcripts were then read and re-read, with initial observations and potential patterns noted. Reflexive field notes generated during and following data collection were also revisited at this stage (Appendix F), supporting attention to contextual features of participants' accounts and to the researcher's developing interpretations. In line with Braun and Clarke (2022), familiarisation was treated as an active analytic process rather than simply preparation for coding.

Coding was undertaken manually and systematically across the dataset. Initial coding was predominantly inductive, with attention given to both explicit, semantic content and more interpretative meanings within participants' accounts.

Particular attention was given to extracts relevant to the research questions or which contributed to understanding early EBSA. Coding remained flexible, with codes revised, combined or differentiated as engagement with the dataset progressed. For example, a participant's description of "tears on the playground... attachment to parents... anger" was initially coded as *emotional distress at entry*, which later contributed to the subtheme *Somatic expressions of distress*. Further examples of the relationship between participant extracts, initial codes and subsequent subthemes are presented in Appendix G.

Generating initial themes involved examining codes across parent and school staff accounts for broader patterns of shared meaning. Related codes were brought together and considered in relation to the research questions, while retaining attention to differences and tensions across accounts. For example, codes relating to crying, physical resistance at the school entrance, anxiety within morning routines and unexplained distress contributed to the development of a broader pattern concerning the subtle and variable early presentation of EBSA. At this stage, themes were provisional and were understood as actively constructed through engagement between the researcher and the dataset rather than as themes that simply 'emerged' from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Developing and reviewing themes involved returning repeatedly to both coded extracts and the complete dataset to consider whether each candidate theme represented a coherent pattern of shared meaning and whether distinctions between themes were sufficiently clear. Themes and subthemes were reorganised where necessary, and consideration was given to data that did not fit developing interpretations. This recursive process enabled themes to become more conceptually focused while maintaining a clear relationship with the coded data and wider dataset. Appendix G illustrates this progression through coded extracts and subthemes, while the final thematic structure is presented in Appendix K.

Refining, defining and naming themes involved identifying the central organising concept of each theme and clarifying how individual themes contributed to the overall account of early EBSA. Theme names were refined to communicate the analytic interpretation clearly rather than simply describe a topic. This resulted in six themes which captured patterns relating to early signs of distress, unmet need

and environmental factors, relational safety, flexible and relational school responses, family experience, and systemic and transitional influences. The final themes and associated subthemes are presented in Appendix K.

Writing up represented a further stage of analysis rather than simply the reporting of completed themes. Participant extracts were selected to illustrate and support the analytic narrative, with continued movement between extracts, themes, research questions and relevant literature. The thematic map (Figure 9) and the full themes and subthemes presented in Appendix K demonstrate the resulting analytic structure.

Reflexivity remained integral across all six phases. RTA recognises that analysis is shaped through the researcher's active interpretative engagement with the data, meaning that professional experiences, assumptions and theoretical sensitivities were considered throughout rather than treated as influences that could be removed from the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Reflexive field notes (Appendix F) were used to record and critically consider developing interpretations. For example, I recognised that my professional background as a TEP and former primary school teacher, alongside my familiarity with ecological approaches, may have sensitised me to relational and systemic patterns within participants' accounts. This was particularly relevant when considering the prominence of relational safety and small, flexible adaptations within the developing analysis. Reflexive notes supported consideration of whether these developing interpretations were adequately supported across participants' accounts, while also remaining open to alternative or less expected interpretations. My positionality, including the ways in which my professional background and prior experiences may have enabled and constrained interpretation, is considered in greater depth in Chapter 3 (Section 3.2).

Throughout the analytic process, attention was given to capturing the complexity and variability of participants' experiences. Rather than privileging a single perspective, analysis attended to both parent and school staff accounts, allowing for exploration of similarities and differences across contexts. This multi-perspective approach supported the development of a more nuanced and ecologically grounded understanding of EBSA (De Los Reyes et al., 2015).

2.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were central to the design and implementation of this study, given the sensitive nature of the topic and the focus on children's emotional wellbeing and school experiences. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of East Anglia Ethics Committee (Appendix H) and amended (Appendix I). The study was conducted in accordance with the British Psychological Society Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2021), Health and Care Professions Council standards (HCPC, 2024) and the British Educational Research Association ethical guidelines (BERA, 2024).

Participation was voluntary and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were provided with a detailed information sheet (Appendix J) outlining the purpose of the study, what participation would involve and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Care was taken to ensure that information was presented clearly and accessibly.

Prior to each interview, participants were reminded of the purpose of the study and the voluntary nature of their involvement. It was also explained that interviews would be audio recorded, with verbal consent reconfirmed before recording commenced.

Given the focus on EBSA, it was recognised that discussions may evoke emotional responses, particularly for parents reflecting on their child's experiences. Interviews were conducted sensitively, with participants reminded that they could pause or withdraw at any point. Information about relevant support services was provided where appropriate. In one instance, an interview with a parent was discontinued because her presence in school was causing distress for her child. This remained an important ethical consideration throughout the research (BPS, 2021).

Confidentiality and anonymity were carefully considered. All data were anonymised during transcription and reporting, with pseudonyms assigned to participants. However, it is recognised that complete anonymity cannot be fully guaranteed within school-based research, where participants may be aware of others' involvement, especially where focus groups were used. This was addressed through clear communication and the removal of identifiable information (BERA, 2024).

The involvement of school staff required additional consideration in relation to professional identity and potential perceptions of evaluation. Participants were reassured that their contributions would be anonymised and used solely for the purposes of the research and that the study did not seek to evaluate individual practice or form an evaluation of the school.

The researcher's role as a TEP working within the Local Authority also required careful consideration. To minimise potential power dynamics or role confusion, it was made explicit that the researcher was acting in a research capacity and additional professional work that was undertaken within participating schools during the research period was clearly separated on different dates. This supported the maintenance of clear boundaries and reduced the risk of perceived coercion (BPS, 2021).

Data were managed in accordance with the Data Protection Act (2018) and UK General Data Protection Regulation (2016). All recordings were stored securely on encrypted university systems and deleted following transcription. Transcripts and related data were stored in line with university data storage policies, with access restricted to the researcher.

Overall, ethical considerations were embedded throughout the research process, supporting a focus on the wellbeing, autonomy and dignity of all participants.

2.8 Results

2.8.1 Quantitative Findings

Although limited in scale, the survey data provided initial insight into patterns of early EBSA risk and resilience factors across child, family and school contexts. Responses suggested that risk was most pronounced in relation to school-based

experiences, with children reporting experiencing greater difficulty in managing school demands compared to other domains.

To support the interpretation of the survey data, Figures 6-8 present the mean scores across respondents for risk and resilience factors within child, family and school domains. These visual representations provide an overview of how different areas of vulnerability and strength were perceived across the sample.

Figure 6

Risk and Resilience Factors: Child Factors

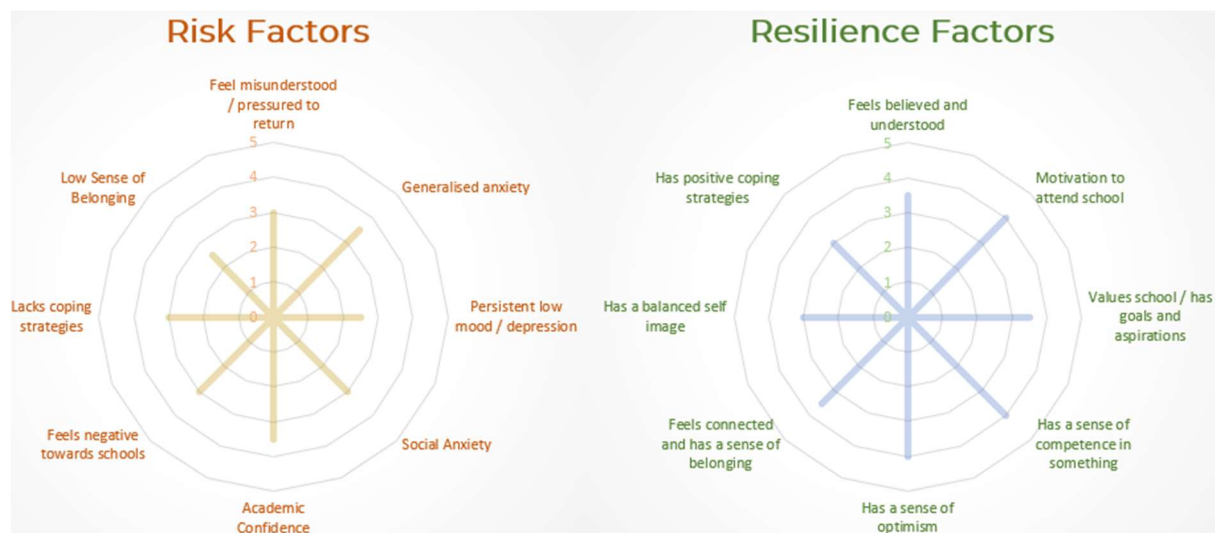


Figure 7

Risk and Resilience Factors: Family Factors

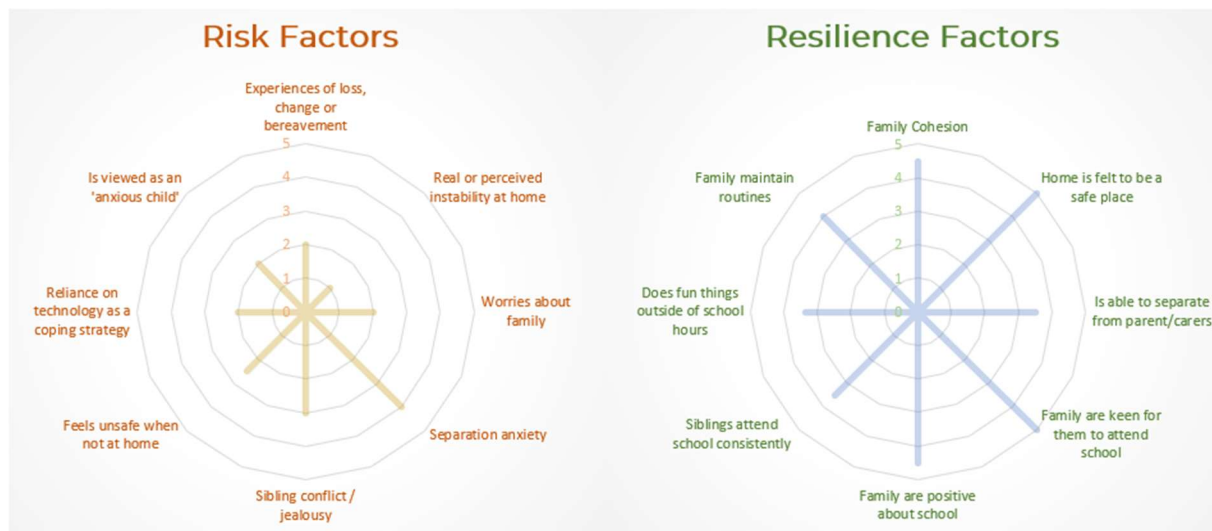
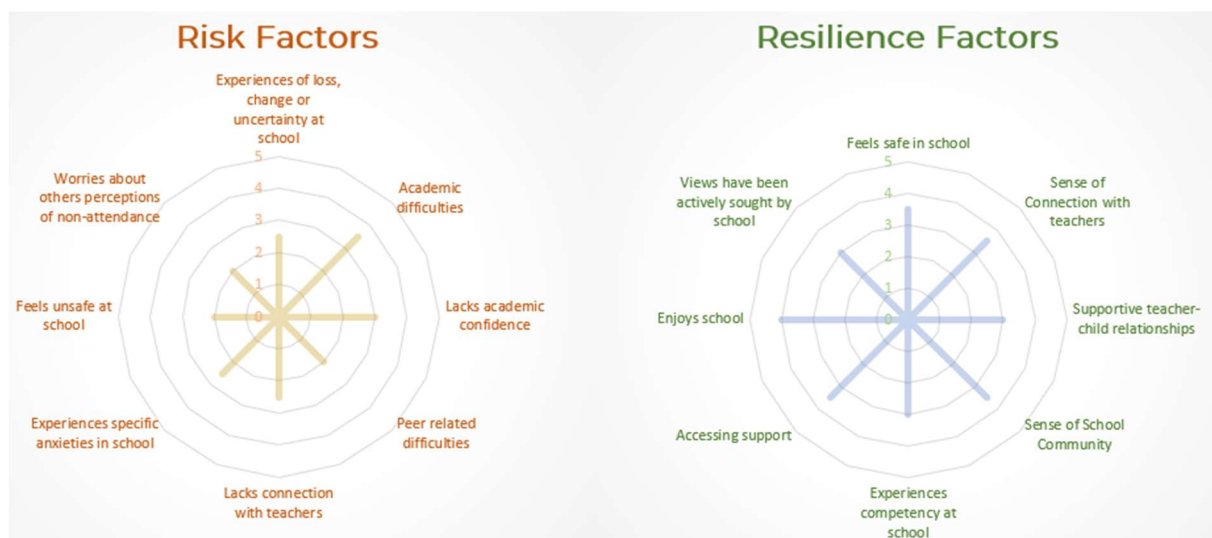


Figure 8

Risk and Resilience Factors: School Factors



Across all domains, risk factors appeared most pronounced in relation to emotional experiences and school-based demands, while resilience factors were more strongly associated with relational and environmental supports, particularly within family and school contexts. While these patterns should be interpreted cautiously due to the small sample size, the figures offer a useful visual summary of how risk and protective factors are distributed across systems, providing an

interesting foundation for the qualitative findings and reinforcing the ecological nature of EBSA.

Some differences in risk and resilience factors across child, family and school factors were observed between male and female children (Table 8).

Table 8

Descriptive Statistics for Risk and Resilience by Sex

Variable	Male (n = 6) M (SD)	Female (n = 4) M (SD)
Child Risk	55.83 (11.05)	39.50 (21.86)
Family Risk	38.00 (3.69)	32.75 (12.01)
School Risk	47.17 (9.04)	33.50 (16.01)
Child Resilience	53.75 (10.72)	75.00 (4.24)
Family Resilience	64.67 (6.22)	68.33 (13.43)
School Resilience	47.20 (9.26)	61.67 (14.05)

Note: M = mean; SD = standard deviation. Due to missing data, sample sizes vary slightly for resilience variables.

Male children reported higher risk scores, while female children reported higher resilience scores across child, family and school factors. However, these trends did not reach statistical significance aside from differences in resilience factors at the individual level ($t(4) = -2.58, p < .05$, one-tailed). Given the small sample size, however, non-significant findings should be interpreted with caution.

A more notable pattern emerged in relation to age (Early Years/Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2) (Table 9).

Table 9*Descriptive Statistics for Risk and Resilience by Age Group*

Variable	EYFS/KS1 (n = 3) M (SD)	KS2 (n = 8) M (SD)
Child Risk	35.00 (10.00)	52.88 (16.79)
Family Risk	32.33 (4.51)	36.75 (8.43)
School Risk	28.67 (8.02)	46.00 (11.10)
Child Resilience	67.50 (6.36)	58.60 (14.28)
Family Resilience	68.00 (8.49)	64.88 (8.51)
School Resilience	61.00 (2.83)	51.14 (12.95)

Note: EYFS/KS1 = Early Years Foundation Stage/Key Stage 1; KS2 = Key Stage 2. M = mean; SD = standard deviation. Sample sizes vary slightly due to missing data.

Older children reported higher levels of risk and lower levels of resilience across child, family and school levels, but reaching statistical significance for risk factors at the school level only ($t(9) = -2.44$, $p < .05$, one-tailed). This suggests that vulnerability may increase over time, as children encounter greater structural and emotional demands within the school system.

As alluded to above, however, despite clear trends for both sex and age which were found to be consistent across child, family and school levels, the findings from the statistical tests should be interpreted with caution given the small sample size.

These quantitative analyses provide a broad overview of perceived risk and resilience across systems; the qualitative analysis offers a more detailed exploration of how these experiences are understood and enacted in practice. While tentative, the survey data reinforces the importance of attending to early indicators within school contexts, particularly where difficulties may not yet be reflected in attendance data.

2.8.2 Reflexive Thematic Analysis

This section presents the findings from a reflexive thematic analysis exploring early indicators of EBSA across parent and school staff accounts. Consistent with a critical realist position, the analysis moves beyond description to consider both participants' accounts (experiential level) and the underlying processes shaping those accounts (interpretative level).

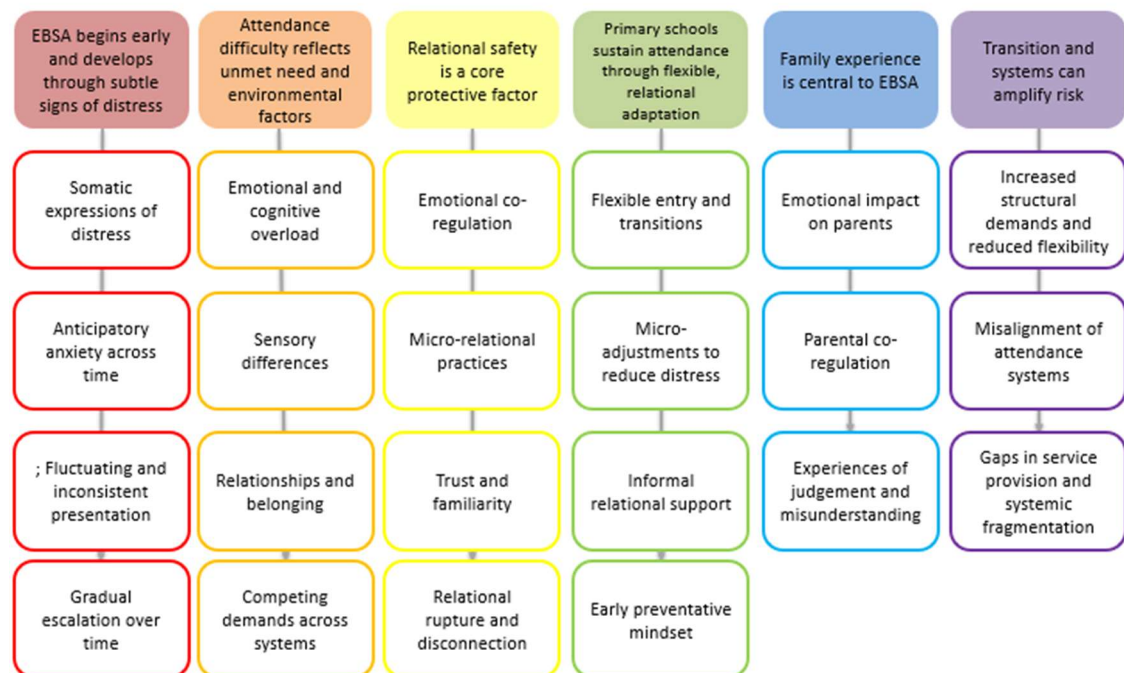
From the outset, the data did not support a conceptualisation of EBSA as a singular or discrete phenomenon. Rather, participants consistently described patterns of interaction unfolding over time, shaped by emotional experience, relational dynamics and environmental context. These patterns were rarely confined to school itself, instead extending across family-school systems and temporal cycles.

For example, one parent described the cyclical nature of anxiety across the week:

'Every Sunday night I know he's not going to sleep... because he knows it's Monday tomorrow.' (P1)

This account highlights how EBSA is experienced as anticipatory and temporally distributed, rather than event-based. The emotional experience begins prior to school attendance and is sustained through expectation and routine. Such findings foreground the importance of moving beyond attendance metrics to recognise early, less visible indicators of distress.

The analysis generated six interconnected themes, which are presented below (Figure 9). While each theme is discussed separately for clarity, they should be understood as relationally interdependent, reflecting the ecological nature of EBSA.

Figure 9*Thematic Map Detailing Themes and Subthemes*

Theme 1: EBSA begins early and develops through subtle signs of distress. A consistent finding across all participant groups was that EBSA emerges gradually, often through subtle and ambiguous signs that may not initially be recognised as indicators of difficulty. Rather than presenting as overt refusal, early experiences were characterised by low-level emotional, behavioural and relational shifts, which were often difficult for both adults and children to interpret.

Across the dataset, participants described how early indicators were frequently embedded within everyday school experiences and could easily be understood as typical developmental behaviour. However, when considered over time and across accounts, these experiences formed recognisable patterns of increasing distress. This suggests that EBSA develops as a process rather than a discrete event.

Somatic expressions and non-verbal distress. A prominent feature of early EBSA was the way in which distress was communicated through the body rather than through language. Participants consistently described children presenting with

physical complaints or generalised expressions of discomfort, often without being able to articulate an underlying cause.

As one member of staff explained:

‘It’s the bellyache. It’s a headache. I don’t want to go... and they can’t say why.’ (A1)

Parents described similar patterns, where distress appeared through shifting or situational physical complaints:

‘I’ve hurt my leg... I’ve hurt my finger... there’s always something.’ (P2)

These accounts suggest that early EBSA may be experienced as embodied distress, where emotional experiences are expressed somatically rather than verbally. This appeared especially relevant for younger children, who may not yet have the emotional language to explain what feels difficult. As A1 further reflected, children often:

‘just can’t say why...’

This indicates that early EBSA is not marked by an absence of meaning, but by difficulty in recognising or communicating internal emotional experience. It also suggests that adults may need to look beyond the literal content of children’s explanations and attend more closely to the emotional meaning beneath them.

Anticipatory anxiety and temporal patterns. A second pattern across the data was the temporal nature of distress. Participants described how anxiety often emerged in anticipation of school rather than solely within it. Parents referred to predictable cycles of anxiety linked to specific points in time, most notably the transition from weekend to school week.

For example, one parent explained:

‘Every Sunday night I know he’s not going to sleep... because he knows it’s Monday tomorrow.’ (P1)

This pattern was reinforced in the same account:

‘He can have the best weekend... but he will still click into that on a Sunday.’ (P1)

Staff also described children arriving at school already emotionally dysregulated:

‘...you then get the things of them not wanting to leave home. So we get emails and telephone calls saying we’re going to do our best. But you know, they’re very upset.’ (A2)

Collectively, these accounts suggest that EBSA extends across contexts and is not confined to the school day itself. Emotional distress appears to build through anticipation, with anxiety beginning before attendance is required. Weekends and time away from school may temporarily reduce distress, but they may also intensify the emotional difficulty associated with return. This positions anticipatory anxiety as an important early feature of EBSA, one which may remain hidden if attention is focused only on what happens during the school day.

Fluctuating and inconsistent presentation. Participants also highlighted the inconsistent and context-dependent nature of early EBSA. Children were often described as having ‘good days’ and ‘bad days’, with this variability contributing to the perception that difficulties were temporary, situational or not yet serious.

As one parent described:

‘If specific things are on that day, it’s a harder morning.’ (P2)

Staff similarly reflected on the variable nature of support needs:

‘You see the ones that are higher and then others that are just, like we’ve got one that’s been fine this whole time and then it’s got a little bit more upset from coming away from mum, but she’s getting better again. It’s just like dips now and then with some of them.’ (C3)

Within school, children could also appear settled once they were in class, despite significant distress beforehand:

‘He’ll scream, he’ll run after her. He’s a real handful getting into class. Once he’s in class, he’s been fine’ (C3)

This inconsistency may make early EBSA more difficult to recognise, particularly where children are managing to attend school for part or most of the time. However, across accounts, these fluctuations did not appear random. Instead,

they reflected an underlying pattern of emotional instability that became more visible when viewed over time. This suggests that early EBSA may be overlooked when individual episodes are considered in isolation, rather than as part of a developing trajectory.

Gradual escalation and pattern formation. Across all participant groups, there was a shared sense that EBSA develops through the accumulation of small, repeated experiences. Early indicators were rarely described as significant in isolation but became meaningful when understood as part of a broader pattern.

One school leader described how difficulties often unfolded incrementally:

‘It’s just general lateness that creeps in and then that kind of develops into not being able to go to the classroom and then not coming into school.’ (B2)

Staff also described how distress could escalate into more overt behavioural responses:

‘We were having to prise him off of mum.’ (C4)

Parents reflected in similar ways on how difficulties developed across time:

‘Year 4 was when he proper didn’t want to come here’ (P1)

These accounts suggest that EBSA develops through cumulative emotional load. Small signs of difficulty may initially appear manageable or temporary but can become increasingly entrenched if they are not recognised and responded to. This emphasises the importance of noticing patterns across time, rather than waiting for more overt or severe indicators to emerge.

Integrative interpretation. Overall, this theme highlights that EBSA begins early and is characterised by subtle signs of distress that may be easily overlooked within school systems. Distress was often communicated somatically or non-verbally, unfolded through anticipatory patterns and appeared inconsistently across contexts. Yet when considered over time, these early experiences formed identifiable patterns of increasing emotional difficulty.

This positions EBSA as an emergent process rather than a sudden or isolated problem. Early indicators may be easy to dismiss when viewed individually but become more meaningful when understood in relation to time, context and repetition.

The findings therefore support a preventative understanding of EBSA, where recognising subtle shifts in emotional presentation may create opportunities for earlier intervention before difficulties become more established.

Theme 2: Attendance difficulty reflects unmet need and environmental factors. Across the dataset, participants consistently rejected behavioural interpretations of EBSA, instead positioning attendance difficulty as a meaningful response to underlying need. Non-attendance was rarely described as oppositional or wilful; rather, it was understood as signalling that something within the child's experience of school was difficult to manage.

As A1 explained:

'It's very rare that we'll get one... where it's just 'I don't fancy it today'... it's 'I can't face this... this is too much'.'

This framing reflects a clear shift from behaviour to meaning. The emphasis on '*I can't face this*' highlights how attendance difficulty is experienced as overwhelming rather than chosen. Across accounts, this was consistently linked to a perceived mismatch between the child's needs and the demands of their environment.

Importantly, this mismatch was not attributed to a single factor. Instead, participants described a complex interaction between emotional, sensory, relational and systemic influences, which together shaped children's capacity to engage with school.

Emotional and cognitive overload. Participants frequently described attendance difficulty as emerging when children experienced school demands as exceeding their capacity to cope. In these situations, avoidance was understood as a response to overwhelm rather than a behavioural choice.

As A1 reflected:

'There is something about the environment, the expectations or the other people that just makes them feel like 'I can't face that'.'

Parents described similar experiences, where children were unable to articulate a specific cause but showed clear signs of distress:

‘There are days where he literally cannot cope.’ (P1)

Early EBSA may therefore be characterised by a subjective mismatch between environmental demands and the child's perceived coping resources. The difficulty is not necessarily the task itself, but how it is experienced by the child.

Across accounts, this was often accompanied by emotional shutdown or withdrawal, suggesting that children were reaching a point where engagement was no longer manageable. This could present as *‘that total shutdown. I can’t go.’* (A1). Similarly, in response to overwhelming or unclear demands, children might disengage more overtly, where *‘If things are not given to him clearly, then he’ll just fly off the wall and run out of the classroom.’* (C3). Within this context, avoidance can be understood as a form of self-regulation, where withdrawing from school serves to reduce overwhelming emotional states.

Sensory differences. A further dimension of mismatch related to children's sensory experiences within the school environment. Participants described how seemingly minor sensory factors could significantly impact a child's ability to attend.

For example, one parent explained:

‘If his socks feel wrong... that’s it... we’re back to the start.’ (P2)

Similarly, school staff described how environmental factors such as noise could become overwhelming:

‘He really struggles with the noise levels in the classroom.’ (C3)

These accounts highlight how sensory experiences can act as barriers to engagement, particularly for neurodivergent children. Importantly, these difficulties were not framed as deficits within the child, but as arising through the interaction between the child and their environment.

Small adjustments were often described as making a significant difference:

‘There's lots of adaptations we can make. There's things that we do to overcome that.’ (B2)

This reinforces the idea that attendance difficulty may be reduced when environments are adapted to better align with children's needs.

Relationships and belonging. Participants also emphasised the importance of relational experiences in shaping attendance. Across the dataset, children's sense of belonging and perceived safety within relationships emerged as central to their ability to engage with school.

As one parent reflected:

'Having a good understanding teacher makes all the difference.' (P1)

Staff similarly described how emotional connection with families influenced engagement:

'If parents are on board, you're more successful... you know their boundaries.'
(A4)

In contrast, where children felt misunderstood or unsupported, attendance became more difficult. For some children, anxiety appeared to centre on uncertainty within relationships or fear of negative interactions:

'He fears coming in... doesn't know what adults will be like, what children will be like.' (A4)

These accounts suggest that attendance is closely linked to relational safety. Where children feel secure and understood, engagement is more likely; where this is compromised, avoidance may emerge. This positions EBSA as not only an individual experience, but a relational one, shaped through interactions within the school environment.

Competing demands across systems. In addition to school-based factors, participants described how attendance was influenced by experiences within the home environment. For some children, emotional demands across systems created tension between family and school.

For example, separation and attachment-related anxieties were highlighted:

'His anxiety really is coming away from mum... he'll scream, he'll run after her.' (C3)

Other accounts reflected broader family dynamics, including stress within morning routines:

‘The whole process of getting up... coming into school... becomes a big, huge area of anxiety.’ (B2)

These examples illustrate how attendance cannot be understood solely in relation to school. Instead, it is shaped by interactions across multiple systems, including family relationships, routines and wider contextual factors.

In this sense, non-attendance may reflect competing emotional priorities, where remaining at home feels safer or more manageable than attending school.

Integrative interpretation. This theme highlights that attendance difficulty reflects a dynamic interaction between the child and their environment, rather than a single underlying cause. Across emotional, sensory, relational and systemic domains, participants consistently described forms of mismatch that contributed to children experiencing school as overwhelming or unmanageable.

Importantly, these mismatches were often interconnected. For example, sensory sensitivities could exacerbate emotional overwhelm, while relational uncertainty could heighten anticipatory anxiety. This validates the need to understand EBSA as a complex, context-dependent process.

Overall, the findings support a shift away from behavioural interpretations of non-attendance towards a more nuanced understanding of EBSA as a signal of unmet need. This aligns with the broader ecological framework underpinning the study and supports the rationale for the SENSE framework, which emphasises the importance of identifying and responding to early indicators of mismatch across systems.

Theme 3: Relational safety is a core protective factor. Across all interviews, relationships were consistently positioned as central to whether children were able to engage with school. Participants described how the presence of a trusted adult could significantly alter a child’s ability to attend, particularly at points of transition. In this sense, relational experiences were not peripheral to attendance, but foundational to it.

Rather than focusing on formal interventions, participants emphasised the importance of everyday relational interactions. These were described as shaping

how children experienced school on an emotional level, influencing whether it felt manageable or overwhelming.

Emotional co-regulation at points of transition. A key function of relationships across the dataset was emotional co-regulation, particularly during moments of heightened anxiety such as arrival at school. Participants described how trusted adults supported children to manage distress, enabling them to tolerate entry into the school environment.

As one parent described:

‘She makes him laugh... she makes him feel welcome... she just sort of eases him in the door.’ (P1)

This account illustrates how anxiety is reduced through relational interaction. The idea of being ‘eased... in the door’ suggests that attendance is supported through co-regulation rather than expectation alone. Interestingly, the member of staff that the parent was describing was a member of the office team. This highlights how important it is to look at all adult interactions that a child might have as part of their day.

School staff similarly described the importance of adapting to children’s emotional states:

‘You’ve just got to meet them where they are that day.’ (A4)

Together, these accounts position adults as active participants in regulating children’s emotional experience, highlighting the role of responsiveness and flexibility in supporting engagement.

Micro-relational practices and everyday interactions. Participants consistently emphasised that relational safety is built through small, repeated interactions embedded within everyday practice. These interactions were described as informal, relational and often not explicitly tied to learning, yet played a significant role in supporting children’s engagement.

As one participant explained:

‘You just pledge for the next 10 days or two weeks, in effect, you spend 2 minutes with them... just not necessarily about work... just stuff... just little... just emotional, it’s basically create emotional currency’ (B1)

This demonstrates how connection is developed through brief but consistent moments of attention, rather than structured intervention. These interactions were framed as relational rather than task-focused, centred on building familiarity and trust.

The same participant described how small, everyday gestures contributed to children’s willingness to attend:

‘it’s all just little things like that... and then it’s just that sort of rapport really... and then they want to come in’ (B1)

Here, relational engagement is positioned as cumulative, where repeated low-level interactions foster a sense of connection that supports attendance.

This was further reinforced through descriptions of deliberate efforts to build connection through shared interests:

‘I can tell you the scores of most of the football at the weekend... didn’t watch any of them... but I will make a point of finding that out... that matters to that child’ (C1)

Such accounts illustrate how children’s sense of being known is constructed through small acts of recognition, where adults demonstrate interest in aspects of the child’s life beyond school.

Collectively, these accounts suggest that relational safety is developed incrementally through everyday interactions, where small, consistent acts of attention, interest and connection contribute to children feeling recognised and valued within the school environment.

Trust, familiarity and relational continuity. A further dimension of relational safety related to the importance of trust, familiarity and consistency within relationships. Participants described how children’s ability to engage with school was closely linked to having access to known and trusted adults.

As one parent reflected:

‘If it wasn’t for her, I definitely wouldn’t get him through that front door.’ (P1)

This highlights how specific relationships can play a central role in enabling attendance, particularly at points of transition. Similarly, another parent described how school had adapted to ensure this continuity:

‘[His] teacher comes down to him... the teacher that he’s trusted with does come and get him.’ (P2)

These accounts suggest that familiarity with a consistent adult can reduce the emotional demand associated with entering school.

Staff also emphasised the importance of children feeling secure within relationships:

‘The bottom line for us is that that child is in a place where they feel safe, supported...’ (A2)

Across accounts, this sense of safety appeared closely linked to predictability and continuity. Where children knew who they would encounter and what to expect, school was experienced as more manageable.

In contrast, disruptions to routine were described as destabilising:

‘Half terms completely throw him... it takes him weeks to get back into the throw of school.’ (P1)

These extracts highlight how relational continuity operates as a stabilising factor within children’s experiences. Trust appears to support engagement by reducing uncertainty, particularly for children who find change and unpredictability difficult to manage.

Relational rupture and perceived disconnection. While positive relationships were described as protective, participants also highlighted how fragile these processes can be. Experiences of disconnection or uncertainty within relationships were described as having a significant impact on children’s ability to attend school.

For example, one member of staff reflected:

‘He fears coming in... doesn’t know what adults will be like, what children will be like.’ (A4)

This captures how uncertainty within relationships can heighten anxiety, particularly where children are unsure how they will be received within the school environment.

Parents also described how emotional security could be disrupted by a change of adult, even where support was previously in place:

‘Having a good understanding teacher makes all the difference. He didn’t have that in year 4’ (P1)

Relational strain could emerge within everyday interactions and routines:

‘The whole process of getting up... coming into school... becomes a big, huge area of anxiety.’ (B2)

Together, these accounts suggest that it is not simply the presence of support that matters, but how that support is experienced by the child. Where relationships feel uncertain, inconsistent or difficult to predict, anxiety appears to increase, reducing a child’s capacity to engage with school.

Relational processes across systems. Participants described how relationships operate across family and school systems. Alignment between these systems was seen as supporting engagement, while disconnection created additional difficulty.

For example, one parent highlighted the importance of shared understanding between family and school:

‘I have spoken to [the SENCo] about it... and... adjustments have been made.’ (P2)

This reflects how communication between parents and school staff can support more responsive and consistent approaches to a child’s needs.

From a school staff perspective, this relational work also required flexibility in how families were approached. As B2 explained:

‘When you're communicating with parents, I think it's really important to understand those differences. You can't approach every family the same way.’

Another member of staff reflected on the importance of having families on board:

‘For that relationship not to be there between the school and the family, that's hard.’ (A5)

Across these accounts, there is a suggestion that relational safety extends beyond individual relationships to include how systems interact. Where communication and understanding are shared between family and school, children are more likely to experience consistency in support, whereas disconnection between systems may increase difficulty.

Integrative interpretation. This theme positions relational safety as central to children's engagement with school. Across the dataset, relationships were consistently described as shaping whether school felt manageable or overwhelming, influencing children's capacity to attend, particularly at key points of transition.

Relational processes operated in multiple, interconnected ways. At moments of heightened anxiety, trusted adults supported emotional co-regulation, enabling children to tolerate entry into the school environment. Alongside this, everyday interactions played a significant role. Small, repeated relational practices contributed to children feeling known and recognised, building a sense of connection over time.

Trust and familiarity were also key. Consistent relationships with known adults reduced uncertainty and supported engagement, while disruptions to these relationships or to routine were described as destabilising. This positions the importance of relational continuity in creating a sense of safety within the school environment.

At the same time, participants emphasised the fragility of these processes. Where relationships were experienced as uncertain, inconsistent or disrupted, anxiety appeared to increase, reducing children's capacity to engage. This suggests that it is not simply the presence of support that matters, but how that support is experienced by the child.

Relational processes also extended beyond individual interactions to include connections between family and school. Where communication and understanding were shared across systems, children appeared more able to engage, while disconnection created additional challenges.

Overall, these findings position relational safety as an ongoing and dynamic process, constructed through everyday interactions and shaped across systems. This reinforces the importance of understanding EBSA as a relational and ecological phenomenon, where engagement is influenced by the quality, consistency and alignment of relationships within and between contexts.

Theme 4: Primary schools sustain attendance through flexible, relational adaptation. Participants consistently described how primary school contexts can play a significant role in mitigating early signs of anxiety around attending school through flexible, relationally informed practices. These approaches were rarely formalised within policy or procedure yet were experienced by both parents and staff as effective in supporting children to remain engaged with school.

Rather than relying on structured or standardised interventions, participants emphasised the importance of responsive, child-centred adaptations that prioritised emotional readiness over procedural consistency. Schools were therefore described not simply as settings in which attendance difficulties occur, but as active systems that adapt in response to children's needs.

As B2 explained:

‘So we see these trends and being in a primary school, there's lots of adaptations we can make.’

This reflects a pragmatic and relationally driven approach, where the immediate focus is on supporting the child to enter the school environment. In this context, flexibility was not framed as an exception to usual practice, but as an integral part of enabling engagement.

This approach was echoed across accounts, where participants described adjusting expectations, routines and interactions in response to how the child was presenting on a given day. Adaptation was therefore understood as ongoing and responsive, rather than fixed or predetermined.

Flexible entry and transitions. A key area in which this adaptability was evident was during transitions into school, particularly at the start of the day. Participants described a range of flexible practices designed to reduce emotional demand at these points, including adjusted start times, alternative entry routes and gradual transitions into the classroom.

‘We just get them in however we can.’ (A2)

This approach recognises that for children experiencing anxiety, the transition into school may represent a significant emotional challenge. By reducing the intensity of this moment, schools are able to support children to enter the environment in a way that feels more manageable.

Staff also described using ‘soft starts’ to meet individual needs more flexibly at the beginning of the day:

‘Once we started offering...for these children... encouragement for them to come in would be, do you want a bit of time in the Thrive room or you can start outside your class... And we found that it's like, once we talked about that sort of thing, they were much more receptive coming in.’ (B1)

This suggests that transitions into school can carry a high emotional load, reinforcing the need for flexible and responsive approaches at this point in the day.

These accounts highlight how transition is managed flexibly and relationally, with adults adapting their approach in response to the child’s emotional state. These practices can be understood as reducing the emotional threshold required for engagement. Rather than expecting children to meet fixed expectations, schools adapt the environment to better align with the child’s needs, thereby supporting attendance.

Micro-adjustments to reduce distress. In addition to broader adaptations, participants highlighted the importance of small, individualised adjustments in shaping children’s experiences of school. These micro-adjustments were often highly specific to the child yet could have a significant impact on attendance.

For example, one parent described:

‘We changed the socks... and Wednesdays were fine.’ (P2)

This example illustrates how seemingly minor changes can fundamentally alter a child's capacity to engage. What may appear insignificant from an adult perspective can be experienced as highly meaningful by the child, particularly where sensory or emotional sensitivities are involved.

Staff similarly described making small, responsive adjustments in the moment:

'We have a specific one that sometimes comes in a little bit wobbly, doesn't want to come in. I kind of just coax him in. I'll try and have a little conversation with him, something totally different, so he's completely off of the idea of him coming in and that seems to work.' (A3)

This account highlights how subtle shifts in adult approach, such as redirecting attention or reducing immediate demand, can support children to transition into school more successfully.

Taken together, these accounts suggest that effective support does not necessarily rely on complex or formalised intervention, but on an attuned understanding of the individual child and their specific needs. Small changes within the immediate environment and interaction can reduce distress and support engagement.

Informal relational support. A further feature of school-based adaptation was the use of informal, relationally embedded support. Rather than being delivered through formal intervention programmes, support was often integrated into everyday interactions between staff and children.

Participants described practices such as check-ins, informal conversations and emotional reassurance as central to supporting attendance:

'It's just checking in with them... seeing how they are that day.' (A2)

These interactions were not described as additional tasks, but as part of everyday practice. This suggests that support is often embedded within routine interactions, rather than existing as a separate or specialised provision.

Importantly, these relational practices align closely with Theme 3, where emotional co-regulation and relational safety were identified as key protective factors. Here, these processes are enacted within the school context through

everyday interactions, reinforcing the importance of relational approaches in supporting attendance.

Early preventative mindset. Participants described a strong emphasis on early identification and preventative response within primary school contexts. Rather than waiting for attendance to decline significantly, staff described a proactive approach to recognising and responding to early signs of difficulty.

As A1 explained:

‘We want to know from the first day when school is hard.’ (A1)

This reflects an orientation towards early intervention, where even subtle indicators of distress are taken seriously from the outset. Rather than relying on thresholds such as persistent absence, staff described a focus on identifying and responding to difficulty as soon as it emerges.

Parents similarly valued this proactive approach:

‘They picked up on it straight away... before it became a big problem.’ (P1)

These accounts suggest that early recognition is not only possible but actively prioritised within primary school contexts. This positions schools as able to intervene before patterns of non-attendance become more established, supporting a preventative rather than reactive model of support.

Integrative interpretation. This theme positions primary schools as adaptive systems, capable of responding flexibly to early signs of EBSA. Across the dataset, participants consistently described how flexible, relationally informed practices enabled children to remain engaged with school, particularly where anxiety was emerging but not yet entrenched.

Adaptation was described as ongoing and responsive, rather than fixed or procedural. Schools adjusted expectations, routines and interactions in relation to how the child was presenting, with a clear emphasis on emotional readiness. This was particularly evident during transitions into school, where flexible approaches such as soft starts and alternative entry points reduced the intensity of the school day and supported initial engagement.

Alongside this, small, individualised adjustments were described as playing a significant role. Micro-adjustments, often highly specific to the child, were able to reduce distress and make school feel more manageable. These practices were rarely formalised, but were embedded within everyday interactions and decision-making processes, highlighting the importance of professional judgement and relational attunement in responding to attendance difficulties.

Informal relational practices also formed a central part of this adaptive response. Support was often integrated into everyday interactions, rather than delivered through discrete interventions, reinforcing the role of relationships in enabling engagement. In this way, relational processes identified in Theme 3 were enacted through day-to-day practice within the school environment.

A further key feature of this theme was the emphasis on early identification and preventative response. Participants described a proactive approach, where early signs of difficulty were recognised and responded to from the outset. This suggests that primary schools may be particularly well placed to intervene before patterns of non-attendance become more established, potentially preventing the escalation of difficulties over time.

Overall, these findings suggest that engagement is supported not through standardised approaches, but through flexible, relational and contextually responsive practice. From an ecological perspective, this highlights how adaptations within the school microsystem can shape children's experiences and influence trajectories of EBSA. Where schools are able to respond in this way, they may support sustained engagement and reduce the likelihood of more entrenched attendance difficulties.

This is reflected within the SENSE framework, where responsiveness to early indicators, relational attunement and system-level flexibility are positioned as key components of effective practice.

Theme 5: Family experience is central to EBSA. Across the dataset, participants consistently described EBSA as a shared family experience, rather than an individual difficulty located solely within the child. Parents articulated the wide-ranging emotional, practical and relational impact of attendance difficulties, highlighting how EBSA reshapes everyday life within the home.

Rather than being confined to the school day, EBSA was experienced as extending across routines, relationships and emotional dynamics within the family system. This positions the family not simply as a context for EBSA, but as an active component in how it is experienced, managed and responded to over time.

As one parent reflected:

‘It’s a whole other world of parenting.’ (P1)

This statement captures the extent to which EBSA can alter expectations of parenting, requiring ongoing adaptation and emotional labour. Parents described navigating uncertainty, managing distress and responding to fluctuating needs, often without clear guidance or support.

Emotional impact on parents. Participants described the significant emotional impact of EBSA on parents, including stress, exhaustion and feelings of helplessness. These experiences were often described as cumulative, reflecting the ongoing nature of attendance-related difficulties.

As one parent described:

‘Everything revolves around getting him there.’ (P2)

This emphasises the extent to which daily routines and family life become organised around supporting school attendance, often requiring significant emotional and practical adjustment.

This was further reflected in parents’ descriptions of the emotional strain associated with managing these experiences. This parent was discussing having to take time off or be late in to work:

‘Obviously it’s quite stressful.’ (P2)

These accounts suggest that EBSA affects not only the child’s wellbeing, but also the emotional functioning of the wider family system. This demonstrates the importance of recognising parental experience as central to understanding EBSA, rather than as secondary to the child’s needs.

Parental co-regulation and emotional reciprocity. A further finding was the reciprocal nature of emotional regulation within the parent-child relationship. Parents

described how their own emotional states directly influenced their child's experience, highlighting a process of bi-directional co-regulation.

As P1 explained:

'If I'm calmer, he's calmer.' (P1)

This account illustrates how emotional regulation is not contained within the individual and how it emerges through interaction. Parents described needing to manage their own anxiety in order to support their child, often in situations that were themselves emotionally demanding.

Staff also recognised this dynamic:

'We're much more like, oh, you know, arm around the shoulder. We've noticed this... is there anything different we can help with?' (B1)

The parent-child relationship may therefore play an important role in regulating distress across contexts. This highlights the importance of considering family processes within responses to EBSA, rather than focusing solely on the child.

Experiences of judgement and misunderstanding. While participants generally described positive relationships with schools, some reported experiences of judgement or misunderstanding in relation to expectations around attendance. Parents described feeling that their child's difficulties were not always fully recognised, leading to tension between their lived experience and system-level expectations.

As one participant reflected:

'If a child screamed here because they didn't want to go home, it'd be a safeguarding issue... but when they scream because they don't want to go in, parents are expected to trust the adults.' (A4)

This account highlights a perceived inconsistency in how distress is interpreted across contexts. While distress in one setting is recognised as a potential safeguarding concern, similar behaviour in relation to school attendance may be minimised or reframed as a behavioural issue. This appeared to contribute to parents feeling that their concerns were not fully understood or taken seriously.

This highlights the importance of alignment between family and school systems. Where understanding is shared, support appears more effective; where it is not, relational tension may further exacerbate existing difficulties.

Integrative interpretation. This theme positions the family as a central system within the experience of EBSA, where emotional, relational and practical processes interact to shape how attendance difficulties are understood and managed. Across the dataset, EBSA was consistently experienced not only by the child, but by the family as a whole, with implications for parental wellbeing, daily functioning and family relationships.

Parents described the cumulative emotional impact of supporting a child experiencing EBSA, alongside the practical adaptations required to manage attendance. These experiences were closely connected to processes of co-regulation, where parents actively managed their own emotional responses in order to support their child. This indicates that emotional regulation operates relationally, emerging through interaction rather than being located solely within the individual.

Concurrently, experiences of judgement or misunderstanding highlight tensions between family experience and system-level expectations. Where children's distress was not fully recognised, parents described feeling that their concerns were minimised or reframed, which could impact relationships with school. This suggests that the effectiveness of support is closely linked to the extent to which understanding is shared across family and school contexts.

From an ecological perspective, these findings highlight how EBSA is shaped through interactions within and between systems. The family operates not only as a context, but as an active mechanism through which distress is experienced, regulated and responded to over time. This reinforces the importance of approaches that engage with family processes as part of understanding and responding to EBSA, rather than focusing solely on the child in isolation.

This is reflected within the SENSE framework, where attention to family experience, relational processes and system alignment are positioned as central to recognising and responding to early indicators of EBSA.

Theme 6: Transition and systems can amplify risk. The final theme highlights how structural and systemic factors can increase vulnerability to EBSA, particularly during periods of transition. While earlier themes emphasised the protective role of relationships and flexible, relationally informed responses within primary school contexts, participants described how these supports may be disrupted or diminished within wider systems, increasing the risk of escalation.

Across the dataset, transition points were consistently identified as moments of heightened vulnerability. These were characterised not only by increased demands, but by a loss of relational continuity and a shift towards more structured and less responsive systems. In contrast to the flexibility described within primary settings, participants described environments where adaptation was less readily available and expectations were more fixed. Participants spoke of a range of transitions being important: primary to secondary school was key but also the increase of formalised learning as children moved from one Key Stage to the next.

This suggests that transition involves not simply a change in setting, but a shift in how children are supported. Where relational safety and flexibility are reduced, children may be required to manage increased emotional and environmental demands with fewer protective factors in place. This creates conditions in which existing difficulties may intensify, increasing the likelihood of attendance becoming more challenging over time. It also supports the importance of continuity across systems.

Increased structural demands and reduced flexibility. Participants described how demands within the school system increase over time, with a clear shift in expectations and structure as children progress through primary school and into secondary education. This progression was understood as both developmental and systemic, with increasing expectations placed on children as they move through the system:

‘So much development happens in a primary stage... There’s so much difference between a three-year old and 11-year-old.’ (A1)

While this reflects a natural developmental trajectory, participants suggested that increasing demands are not always matched by continued flexibility or support. Instead, the move towards secondary school was associated with greater structure,

reduced adaptability and a shift in how children are expected to manage these demands independently.

This transition was frequently described as a move from familiarity to uncertainty:

‘It’s the known going down to the unknown. So they all struggle with it in some way.’ (A5)

Participants highlighted how this shift is accompanied by changes in relational structures, which further alter how support is experienced:

‘You haven’t got that one teacher that oversees the whole school day... it’s different teachers... you don’t have that continuity... You will be met by the same person every day... at secondary school, it’s not going to be as easy because you won’t particularly have that.’ (A5)

These accounts suggest that increasing structural demands are closely linked with a reduction in relational consistency and predictability. In contrast to primary school contexts, where flexibility and continuity were described as supporting engagement, secondary environments were experienced as more fragmented and less responsive.

Across the dataset, these changes were described as overwhelming, even for children who might otherwise be expected to cope:

‘It’s overwhelming, even for the most confident.’ (C1)

This sense of overwhelm was further reflected in expectations placed on children to manage independently:

‘They’re expected to just get on with it... there’s not that same flexibility.’ (A2)

These accounts suggest that progression through the school system involves not only an increase in demands, but a reduction in flexibility and relational support. This can be understood as a shift towards more system-driven expectations, where children are required to adapt to the environment, rather than the environment adapting to them. This may amplify existing vulnerabilities, particularly for those who have relied on relational support and flexible adjustments to manage emotional distress and maintain engagement.

Misalignment of attendance systems. A further issue identified across the dataset was the perceived mismatch between formal attendance measures and children's lived experiences. Participants described how attendance data often failed to capture the complexity of engagement, particularly where children were physically present in school but experiencing significant distress.

As one parent explained:

'They're in school every day... but the attendance looks horrific.' (P2)

Staff accounts similarly highlighted how outward compliance could mask underlying emotional difficulty:

'They sit in class: "Yes Miss, No Miss," but inside they're miserable.' (A4)

These accounts highlight a disconnect between quantitative measures of attendance and qualitative experiences of participation. Children may be attending school in a technical sense but struggling emotionally or requiring significant support to do so.

Current systems of monitoring attendance may overlook important indicators of early EBSA. Where focus is placed primarily on absence, early signs of distress may go unrecognised, limiting opportunities for preventative intervention.

Gaps in service provision and systemic fragmentation. Participants highlighted challenges in accessing appropriate support, especially when needs were perceived as complex but did not meet thresholds for specialist services. These accounts suggest that children experiencing EBSA may fall between systems, with responsibility for support remaining unclear.

As one participant reflected:

'If it doesn't fit into SEND and it doesn't fit into like whatever...then it's kind of a little bit ... lost.' (C1)

This shows how support systems organised around specific categories or thresholds may struggle to respond to needs that do not fit neatly within existing frameworks. In this context, children experiencing EBSA may not meet criteria for targeted provision, despite experiencing significant difficulty.

Staff also described how system pressures can limit the capacity to identify and respond to less visible forms of distress:

‘Teachers don’t have the time. So the quiet ones slip under the radar.’ (A4)

This suggests that children who do not present with overt behavioural difficulties may be less likely to receive timely support, particularly within systems that prioritise more visible or disruptive needs.

These accounts highlight a gap between the complexity of EBSA and the structure of existing support systems. From an ecological perspective, this suggests that difficulties are shaped not only within systems, but also by the relationships between them. Where systems are organised around thresholds and operate under time constraints, children may experience discontinuity in support, increasing the risk of difficulties escalating over time.

Integrative interpretation. This theme explores how structural and systemic factors can amplify vulnerability to EBSA, particularly during periods of transition. The loss of relational continuity, increased rigidity of school systems, misalignment of attendance measures and fragmentation of services collectively contribute to an environment in which early difficulties may escalate.

Importantly, these findings contrast with those identified in primary school contexts (Theme 4), where flexibility and relational responsiveness were described as protective. This suggests that the transition between systems represents a critical point at which risk may increase, particularly where supportive practices are not maintained.

From an ecological perspective, EBSA can therefore be understood as shaped not only by experiences within systems, but by transitions between them. This shows the importance of continuity, communication and alignment across systems in supporting children’s engagement.

This is reflected within the SENSE framework, where attention to transitions, system-level responsiveness and inter-system communication are positioned as key components of effective early intervention.

2.8.3 Cross-theme Synthesis: EBSA as an Ecological and Relational Process

Bringing these themes together, EBSA can be understood as an ecological and relational process, rather than a discrete or individualised difficulty. Across the dataset, participants consistently described attendance difficulties as emerging through the interaction of emotional, relational and contextual factors, rather than being attributable to a single cause. In this way, EBSA was not experienced as something located solely within the child, but as something that developed across systems and over time. This remains consistent with the ecological framing underpinning the study, which highlights the importance of understanding school attendance through the interaction between individual experience and the wider environments in which it occurs.

Taken together, the findings suggest that EBSA is best understood not as an outcome, but as an evolving process characterised by shifts in the balance between risk and protective factors over time. Early indicators often emerged subtly, through somatic complaints, anticipatory anxiety and fluctuating presentations, which could easily be overlooked when viewed in isolation. These early signs appeared to reflect an increasing mismatch between the child and their environment, shaped by how manageable, overwhelming, supportive or emotionally demanding school felt. In this sense, attendance difficulty developed not through a single precipitating factor, but through the accumulation and interaction of multiple experiences across contexts.

Across the themes, four interrelated dimensions were consistently evident: emotional processes, including anxiety, anticipatory distress and emotional overload; relational processes, including trust, connection and perceived belonging; contextual factors, including school environments, family systems and wider structural influences; and temporal patterns, including cycles of escalation, recovery and transition. These dimensions did not operate independently. Rather, they appeared to interact in dynamic and reciprocal ways, such that change in one area had implications for others. For example, increased anxiety could reduce a child's capacity to engage relationally, which in turn could alter how manageable the school environment felt. Similarly, supportive relationships could buffer against wider stressors, enabling children to remain engaged despite ongoing difficulty.

The findings also suggest that EBSA is shaped by the extent to which systems are able to respond flexibly to emerging need. Where children experienced relational safety, contextual understanding and responsive adaptation, attendance appeared more manageable. This was particularly evident within primary school contexts, where small adjustments, informal relational support and early recognition of distress were described as protective. In contrast, where systems became more rigid, fragmented or less responsive, difficulties appeared more likely to intensify. This was especially clear in relation to transition, where increasing structural demands, reduced continuity and fragmented systems of support were described as amplifying vulnerability.

Family experience was central within this process. EBSA was not described as something experienced by the child alone, but as something that reshaped family routines, emotional dynamics and parents' own capacity to cope. At the same time, the findings highlighted the importance of alignment between family and school. Where communication, understanding and responsiveness were shared across systems, support appeared more effective. Where they were not, misunderstanding, tension and fragmentation could further exacerbate difficulties. This reinforces the importance of understanding EBSA not only within systems, but through the relationships between them.

Overall, this synthesis positions EBSA as a dynamic process that develops through the interaction of emotional, relational, contextual and temporal influences. This moves beyond behavioural or within-child interpretations, instead highlighting the importance of understanding how distress is shaped, maintained and responded to across systems over time. In this way, the findings support an ecological understanding of EBSA, where early identification depends not simply on noticing absence, but on recognising subtle shifts in children's experience, relationships and context before difficulties become more established. This integrated understanding provides the foundation for the SENSE framework, which seeks to bring these interrelated dimensions together into a coherent model for recognising and responding to early indicators of EBSA within practice.

2.8.4 Overview of Findings

Across both the qualitative and quantitative strands, the findings converge to present EBSA as a dynamic, relational and contextually embedded process, rather than a discrete or individualised difficulty. While the qualitative data provides depth and insight into how these experiences are understood and enacted, the quantitative findings offer a complementary overview of how risk and resilience are distributed across systems.

Both datasets highlight the central role of school contexts in shaping children's experiences of EBSA. Quantitative patterns indicated that risk was most pronounced in relation to school-based factors, while qualitative accounts described school as a site of increasing emotional and structural demand. This was further reflected in the trend for older children to experience higher levels of risk and lower levels of resilience, suggesting that these demands may intensify over time. Participants reflected on how expectations, reduced flexibility and the cumulative pressures of the school environment contributed to heightened anxiety, particularly over time. This alignment supports the interpretation of EBSA as closely linked to children's experiences of school as emotionally demanding.

A developmental pattern is also evident across the findings. Quantitative data suggested increasing risk with age, particularly within school-based domains, while qualitative accounts described how early indicators, often subtle and fluctuating, could intensify if not recognised and responded to. This positions EBSA as an evolving process, shaped over time through interactions between individual experiences and environmental demands.

Across both strands, resilience was most strongly associated with relational and environmental supports, particularly within family and school contexts. Qualitative findings emphasised the importance of relational safety, familiarity and attuned responses, while quantitative trends reflected comparatively stronger resilience scores in these areas. This substantiates the role of relationships not as an additional support, but as a foundational mechanism underpinning children's capacity to engage with school.

An ecological perspective is further supported by the consistency with which experiences were described as emerging through interactions across systems,

including family, school and wider contextual influences. The quantitative profile plots illustrate how risk and resilience are distributed across these domains, while the qualitative findings provide insight into the processes through which these interactions are experienced and interpreted.

The findings address the three research questions in an interconnected way. Early indicators of EBSA (RQ1) were identified as subtle, context-dependent and often easily overlooked. These experiences were understood by parents and school staff (RQ2) as expressions of unmet need, arising through relational and systemic interactions. In response (RQ3), schools were described as most effective when adopting flexible, relational and contextually responsive approaches, although these practices were sometimes constrained by wider systemic factors, particularly during transitions. As shown in Table 10, the themes do not map discretely onto individual research questions but instead contribute across them in an interconnected way. This reflects the ecological nature of EBSA, where processes of recognition, understanding and response are closely interrelated.

Table 10

A Table to Show how the Themes Constructed Through Analysis Address the Three Research Questions

Theme	RQ1: Recognition of early EBSA	RQ2: Understanding of early EBSA	RQ3: Response and early intervention
Theme 1: EBSA begins early and develops through subtle signs of distress	✓ Primary contribution: highlights early indicators (somatic complaints, anticipatory anxiety, fluctuation, escalation)	✓ Supports understanding of how distress is experienced and expressed	
Theme 2: Attendance difficulty reflects unmet need and environmental factors	✓ Supports recognition through identification of mismatch and underlying need	✓ Primary contribution: frames EBSA as response to emotional, sensory, relational and systemic factors	✓ Informs need for context-sensitive responses
Theme 3: Relational safety is a core protective factor	✓ Recognition through relational cues (changes in trust, connection)	✓ Highlights relational processes shaping experience	✓ Central to effective responses (co-regulation, connection, trust)

Theme	RQ1: Recognition of early EBSA	RQ2: Understanding of early EBSA	RQ3: Response and early intervention
Theme 4: Primary schools sustain attendance through flexible, relational adaptation	✓ Early recognition embedded in everyday practice	✓ Reflects how staff interpret and respond to need	✓ Primary contribution: flexible, relational, preventative approaches
Theme 5: Family experience is central to EBSA	✓ Recognition through parent insight and family-based indicators	✓ Primary contribution: highlights family understanding, co-regulation and emotional impact	✓ Informs need for collaborative, family-inclusive approaches
Theme 6: Transition and systems can amplify risk	✓ Highlights where early signs may be missed within systems	✓ Frames EBSA within wider structural and systemic contexts	✓ Highlights barriers to effective intervention (rigidity, fragmentation, thresholds)

Overall, the integration of quantitative and qualitative findings extends existing literature by foregrounding the early and emergent nature of EBSA, and by emphasising the importance of relational and ecological approaches to both identification and intervention. These insights provide the foundation for the discussion, which considers the findings in relation to existing theory and research, and explores their implications for practice, including the development of the SENSE framework.

2.8.5 Linking Findings to the Discussion

The findings in this chapter support the view that EBSA is best understood as a dynamic, multi-layered process rather than a discrete or individual difficulty. Across themes, attendance difficulties were framed as emerging through the interaction of emotional, relational and contextual factors over time (see Appendix K for themes and subthemes).

Early indicators were often subtle, ambiguous and easily overlooked, developing through increasing emotional demands shaped by interactions across family, school and wider systems. This reflects an ecological understanding of EBSA, where difficulties arise through the relationship between the child and their environment.

Relational processes were central throughout, functioning as both protective factors and potential sources of difficulty. Experiences of safety, trust and belonging supported engagement, while disconnection or lack of understanding contributed to withdrawal. Alongside this, contextual and systemic factors were also influential, with primary school environments often described as flexible and supportive, but transitions and wider systems associated with increased risk.

These findings are now considered in relation to existing literature and theory, with particular attention to implications for EP practice.

2.9 Discussion

2.9.1 Early Emergence of EBSA: Subtle Indicators and Development Over Time

The findings from Theme 1 support the understanding that EBSA begins early and develops through subtle, often ambiguous indicators of distress, rather than presenting as immediate or overt non-attendance. Participants consistently described early experiences characterised by low-level emotional and behavioural shifts, including somatic complaints, anticipatory anxiety and fluctuating engagement. This aligns with existing literature which emphasises the heterogeneous and often gradual nature of EBSA, where early signs may not initially be recognised as indicative of difficulty (Havik et al., 2014; Ingul et al., 2019; Thambirajah et al., 2008).

The prominence of somatic expressions of distress within the current findings reflects established research suggesting that anxiety in younger children is frequently communicated through physical symptoms, especially where children may lack the language to articulate internal emotional states (Egger et al., 2003; Grist et al., 2025). Within this study, accounts of ‘bellyaches’ and generalised avoidance highlight how distress may be externalised in ways that are easily interpreted as transient or non-specific. This has important implications for early identification, as such presentations may be normalised within both family and school contexts, potentially delaying recognition of underlying emotional need.

The temporal patterns identified within the data further extend existing understandings of EBSA. Participants described cycles of anticipatory anxiety, particularly linked to predictable transition points such as weekends, holidays and school returns. This reflects previous research which identifies anxiety as both a precipitating and maintaining factor in school attendance difficulties (Halligan & Cryer, 2022; Kearney & Silverman, 1990). However, the current findings suggest that these patterns may emerge prior to sustained non-attendance, indicating that EBSA may develop through repeated cycles of distress and temporary recovery, rather than through a linear escalation. This temporal dimension is less explicitly foregrounded within existing models, which often focus on established patterns of absence.

Importantly, the fluctuating and inconsistent nature of early indicators identified in this study supports conceptualisations of EBSA as existing along a spectrum, rather than as a binary distinction between attendance and non-attendance (Ingul et al., 2019; WSCC, 2022). Participants frequently described ‘good days’ alongside periods of increased distress, suggesting that early EBSA may be masked by variability in presentation. This may contribute to a ‘wait to fail’ approach within systems, where support is triggered only once difficulties become more persistent or visible (Kearney & Graczyk, 2014). The findings therefore reinforce concerns that current thresholds for intervention may not adequately capture early need.

From an ecological perspective, these early indicators can be understood as reflecting emerging imbalance within the child’s wider system. Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory highlights the interconnected nature of the systems surrounding the child, whereby experiences within one part of the system may interact with experiences occurring elsewhere (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Within this study, early emotional distress appears to interact with relational and contextual factors, contributing to a gradual increase in emotional load. Consideration of these interactions over time also acknowledges the later development of Bronfenbrenner’s model and the increased emphasis placed on temporal processes (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). This supports the interpretation of EBSA as an emergent process, shaped by cumulative experiences rather than discrete events.

The subtle and fluctuating nature of early EBSA highlights the need for practitioners to attend to patterns over time, rather than isolated incidents and to consider how low-level indicators may signal underlying vulnerability. This demonstrates the importance of moving beyond attendance data alone, towards a more nuanced understanding of children’s emotional experience within school contexts (DfE, 2024b; NAPEP, 2026).

Overall, this study extends existing literature by emphasising the temporal and cumulative nature of early EBSA, highlighting how distress may be present well before attendance difficulties become formally recognised. This has significant implications for practice, suggesting that earlier, more sensitive approaches to

identification may be required in order to prevent escalation and support more effective intervention.

2.9.2 Attendance as an Expression of Unmet Need: Child-Environment

Mismatch

The findings from Theme 2 position attendance difficulty not as an act of refusal, but as an expression of unmet need, arising from a mismatch between the child and their environment. Across the dataset, participants consistently rejected behavioural interpretations of EBSA, instead framing avoidance as an adaptive, self-protective response to experiences that were perceived as overwhelming, unmanageable, or emotionally unsafe. This aligns with a growing body of literature which conceptualises school attendance difficulties as functional responses to underlying distress, rather than deliberate non-compliance (Kearney, 2008; Lester & Michelson, 2024) (Ingul et al., 2019).

Within this study, participants described multiple forms of mismatch, including sensory, academic, relational and structural factors. These findings reflect ecological and transactional models of development, which emphasise interactions between the individual and their environment and how difficulties may arise from mismatches within these interacting systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Sameroff, 2009). From this perspective, attendance difficulties are not located within the child but may develop through ongoing interactions between personal characteristics and contextual demands. This challenges more individualised or deficit-oriented interpretations of EBSA, which may overlook the role of environmental fit.

The prominence of sensory mismatch within the data is particularly noteworthy. Accounts of distress linked to clothing, noise, or physical discomfort reflect literature highlighting the impact of sensory processing differences on school engagement, particularly for neurodivergent children (Ashburner et al., 2008; Crane et al., 2019; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). Within the current findings, seemingly minor factors were described as having a disproportionate impact on attendance, suggesting that children's experiences of the school environment may differ significantly from adult expectations. This underscores the importance of adopting a

child-centred perspective, where behaviour is understood in relation to subjective experience rather than objective assessment of difficulty.

In addition to sensory factors, participants emphasised relational and emotional mismatch, particularly in relation to feelings of belonging and perceived acceptance. The finding that ‘feeling disliked’ was sufficient to disrupt attendance aligns with research demonstrating the central role of school connectedness in supporting engagement and wellbeing (Cameron et al., 2025; Halligan & Cryer, 2022). This suggests that even subtle relational dynamics may influence a child’s capacity to tolerate school-based demands, further reinforcing the interconnected nature of emotional and contextual factors.

The findings also highlight how mismatch may operate across multiple systems simultaneously. Accounts of separation anxiety and distress during transitions between family and school suggest that attendance decisions are shaped by competing relational demands, rather than solely school-based difficulties. This supports systemic understandings of EBSA, where behaviour is shaped by interactions across family and school contexts (Havik et al., 2015b; Pellegrini, 2007). It also challenges models which prioritise school-based interventions without considering the wider ecological system.

Importantly, the interpretation of EBSA as unmet need has significant implications for practice. Where attendance difficulties are understood as adaptive and self-protective responses, the focus shifts from modifying behaviour to modifying environments and relationships. This is consistent with calls within the literature for more contextualised and needs-led approaches to attendance difficulties, particularly in relation to early intervention (Heyne et al., 2019; Kearney, 2008; Lester & Michelson, 2024). However, such approaches may sit in tension with accountability-driven systems, where attendance is often framed in terms of compliance monitoring, and threshold-based targets, rather than the quality of a child’s experience (DfE, 2024b).

Overall, this study supports and extends existing literature by emphasising the complexity and subjectivity of mismatch in EBSA. By foregrounding children’s lived experiences, the findings challenge simplified interpretations of attendance difficulty and highlight the importance of context in shaping behaviour. This reinforces the

need for approaches that are responsive, relational and ecologically informed, particularly in the early stages of EBSA where patterns of mismatch may be emerging but not yet fully recognised.

2.9.3 Relational Safety as a Central Mechanism in EBSA

The findings from Theme 3 position relational safety as a central mechanism in shaping children's engagement with school. Across the dataset, relationships were consistently described as the factor that either enabled or disrupted attendance. This supports a growing body of literature highlighting the importance of connection, trust and belonging in children's school experiences (Pianta, 1999; Roorda et al., 2011).

Within this study, relationships were not described as a general background influence. Instead, they functioned as active processes that shaped how children experienced and managed anxiety. Accounts of adults 'easing' children into school suggest that relationships can act as a form of emotional regulation. This aligns with research on co-regulation, which highlights how children rely on supportive adults to manage distress, particularly during periods of heightened anxiety (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Morris et al., 2007).

Importantly, the findings suggest that relational support operates through small and consistent interactions, rather than through formal interventions. Staff described everyday practices such as brief check-ins, shared conversations and showing interest in children's lives, which were experienced as meaningful and appeared to have a cumulative effect over time. This extends existing literature by emphasising that relational safety is constructed through consistent, predictable interactions that signal reliability and emotional security (Allen et al., 2018; Halligan & Cryer, 2022).

By contrast, the findings also highlight the fragility of these relational processes. Participants described how perceived uncertainty or lack of relational support was sufficient to disrupt attendance. This reflects research highlighting that children's perceptions of teacher relationships are strongly associated with engagement and school attendance, with supportive relationships acting as a protective factor and relational difficulties contributing to school avoidance (Havik et al., 2015b; Roorda et al., 2011). Within this study, uncertainty about how they would

be received at school was described as increasing anxiety, reinforcing the importance of subjective experience.

Relational safety does not sit within a single system in the ecological model. Instead, it is constructed across interactions between family and school. Parents, teachers and other adults form a network of relationships that collectively shape the child's experience. Where these mesosystemic relationships are aligned, children appear better able to manage anxiety and engage with school; where there is a lack of consistency or shared understanding, vulnerability may increase. This supports systemic understandings of EBSA, which emphasise the interaction between family and school systems, with relational processes across these contexts shaping children's experiences of attendance and engagement (Brown, 2024; Lester & Michelson, 2024).

These findings also highlight a tension within school systems. While relational approaches were described as highly effective, they were often informal and embedded in everyday practice. This raises questions about consistency, particularly across contexts where structural demands may limit opportunities for relational connection (DfE, 2024b; Melvin et al., 2019). The shift towards more formalised systems identified in Theme 6 further clarifies this, suggesting that relational continuity may be increasingly difficult to sustain as children progress through the school system.

Overall, this study reinforces the central role of relationships within EBSA, while extending existing literature by highlighting how relational safety is constructed through everyday practice and shaped by children's perceptions. This has important implications for early intervention, suggesting that strengthening relational processes may be one of the most effective ways of supporting engagement before difficulties become more entrenched.

2.9.4 Primary Schools as Adaptive Systems: Flexibility and Early Response

The findings from Theme 4 suggest that primary school contexts often function as adaptive systems, capable of responding flexibly to early signs of EBSA (Melvin et al., 2019). Across the dataset, participants described a range of informal and relationally driven practices which supported children's engagement, often

before attendance became a formal concern. Although these practices were rarely structured or standardised, they were consistently experienced as effective.

This aligns with literature which highlights the importance of flexibility and responsiveness in supporting children with attendance difficulties, particularly in the early stages (Barriers to Education, 2025; Heyne et al., 2019; Kearney & Graczyk, 2014). Within the schools in the current study, flexibility was not framed as an exception to usual practice but as an embedded feature of day-to-day operation. Adjustments such as alternative entry points, modified routines and reduced expectations during periods of distress were described as both accessible and acceptable within these contexts.

These practices appeared to help to reduce the emotional demand associated with school attendance, particularly at key transition points. By adapting expectations and providing relational support, staff were able to support children to engage with school, even in the presence of ongoing distress (Ingul et al., 2019). This supports research identifying transitions as moments of heightened vulnerability (Jindal-Snape, 2018; West et al., 2010).

The emphasis on small, individualised adjustments also reflects a broader shift within the literature towards needs-led approaches, where intervention is tailored to the child's experience rather than applied uniformly (Halligan & Cryer, 2022; McDonald et al., 2024; Morgan, 2025). Within this study, examples such as minor sensory adaptations or changes to routine were described as having a significant impact on engagement. This affirms the idea that effective support does not always require intensive intervention, instead it may involve targeted and responsive changes which reduce specific sources of difficulty.

Alongside flexibility, participants described a strong emphasis on early identification and proactive response. Staff accounts described a desire to notice and respond to difficulty from the outset, rather than waiting for patterns of absence to develop. This contrasts with more reactive models of intervention, which are often triggered by thresholds of persistent absence (Kearney & Graczyk, 2014). The findings therefore support wider calls within both research and policy for earlier and more preventative approaches to attendance (Boaler et al., 2024; DfE, 2024b).

Within the ecological model, these practices can be understood as examples of system-level adaptation, where the school environment adjusts in response to the child, rather than expecting the child to conform to fixed expectations. Within this study, such adaptations may act as protective factors, reducing the likelihood that early distress escalates into more entrenched attendance difficulties.

However, the findings also raise questions about the sustainability and consistency of these approaches. The informal nature of support suggests that it may be dependent on individual staff knowledge, experience and capacity, rather than embedded within whole-school systems. This may introduce variability in how children are supported across contexts. It also highlights a possible tension between flexible, relational practice and more structured accountability systems, where consistency and standardisation are often prioritised (Lester & Michelson, 2024; Melvin et al., 2019).

Overall, this study extends existing literature by highlighting how primary schools can function as adaptive systems in the early stages of EBSA, using flexible and relational approaches to support engagement. At the same time, it raises important considerations regarding how such practices can be sustained and embedded more consistently, particularly as children move into systems where flexibility may be less readily available.

2.9.5 Family Systems and the Shared Experience of EBSA

The findings from Theme 5 position EBSA as a shared family experience, rather than an individual difficulty located solely within the child. Across the dataset, parents described the emotional, practical and relational impact of attendance difficulties, highlighting how EBSA reshapes everyday life within the home. This supports existing literature which conceptualises school attendance difficulties as systemic in nature, where family processes contribute to both the development and maintenance of EBSA (Kearney, 2008; Kearney & Albano, 2004; Pellegrini, 2007).

Within the study, parents described significant emotional impact, including stress, exhaustion and ongoing uncertainty. These experiences reflected the repeated and ongoing nature of distress across daily routines, where attendance difficulties shaped family life on a day-to-day basis. This aligns with research which

highlights the psychological and emotional burden experienced by parents of children with EBSA, particularly where support is limited or delayed (Finning et al., 2019; Heyne et al., 2020; Sawyer, 2022). The findings therefore reinforce the need to consider parental wellbeing as an integral component of understanding EBSA, rather than as a secondary concern.

A key aspect of this theme was the reciprocal nature of emotional regulation within the parent-child relationship. Parents described how their own emotional state influenced their child's ability to engage with school, suggesting a process of co-regulation. This is consistent with research which highlights the interdependent nature of emotional regulation within families, particularly in the context of anxiety (Creswell et al., 2011; Morris et al., 2007; Thompson & Meyer, 2007). Within the current findings, this dynamic was described as operating in both directions, with child distress impacting parental emotional responses and vice versa. This corroborates the relational nature of EBSA and highlights the importance of supporting both child and parent within intervention.

Participants also described the extent to which family routines were adapted in response to attendance difficulties. Adjustments to mornings and daily routines were often necessary in order to manage distress and support attendance, with family life becoming organised around these demands. This reflects literature which highlights the ways in which families accommodate anxiety-related behaviours to reduce immediate distress (Ingul & Nordahl, 2013; Kearney & Albano, 2004; Lester & Michelson, 2024). While such adaptations may be effective in the short term, they may inadvertently reinforce avoidance patterns over time, particularly in the absence of wider support.

At the same time, the findings highlight tensions between family experience and system-level expectations. Some parents described feeling judged or misunderstood, particularly in relation to attendance policies and assumptions about parenting. This reflects wider research which identifies stigma and blame as common experiences for families of children with EBSA (Elliott & Place, 2019; Halligan & Cryer, 2022; Sawyer & Collingwood, 2024). Such experiences may impact relationships between family and school, potentially reducing opportunities for collaboration and early intervention.

From an ecological perspective, these findings reinforce the importance of understanding EBSA as shaped through interactions between systems. The family is not simply a background context; rather, it is an active component in how difficulties are experienced and managed. Within Bronfenbrenner's mesosystem, the relationship between home and school represents an important interaction between two of the child's immediate contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Where family and school systems are aligned, children may experience greater consistency and support. Where there is misalignment, particularly in expectations or understanding, this may increase stress and contribute to escalation (Epstein, 2018).

Overall, this study supports and extends existing literature by highlighting the central role of family systems within EBSA, particularly in the early stages. By foregrounding parental experience and relational dynamics, the findings emphasise the need for approaches which are collaborative, empathetic and ecologically informed. This has important implications for practice, suggesting that effective intervention requires not only support for the child, but also recognition of the wider family context in which EBSA develops.

2.9.6 Systems, Transitions and Structural Amplification of Risk

The findings from Theme 6 highlight the role of wider systems and structures in shaping vulnerability to EBSA, particularly during periods of transition. While earlier themes emphasised the protective role of relationships and flexibility within primary school contexts, this theme draws attention to how these supports may be reduced or disrupted as children move through the school system, increasing the risk of escalation.

A key finding was the perceived loss of relational continuity, particularly at points of transition. Participants described a shift from consistent, known relationships towards more fragmented interactions, where children are required to navigate multiple adults and environments. This was most clearly articulated in relation to the transition to secondary school but was also reflected more broadly in how relational structures change over time. School transition has similarly been identified as a period of increased vulnerability, particularly for children with existing anxiety or additional needs (Jindal-Snape, 2018; West et al., 2010). Within the current study, this disruption appeared to limit opportunities for relational consistency

and familiarity, which had previously supported engagement. This is consistent with EBSA literature highlighting the importance of predictable, secure relationships in supporting attendance (Heyne et al., 2019; Lester & Michelson, 2024; Melvin et al., 2019).

Importantly, the findings suggest that these changes are not solely developmental but reflect a structural shift in how relationships are organised within school systems. Movement from relational continuity towards more distributed and less consistent forms of contact may increase feelings of anonymity and disconnection, particularly for children who rely on stable relationships to manage distress. Transition can be understood as a change in relational context, rather than simply a change in setting. This aligns with EBSA literature emphasising the importance of consistent, supportive relationships in maintaining engagement, and highlighting the impact of relational disruption on anxiety and school attendance (Halligan & Cryer, 2022; Heyne et al., 2019; Lester & Michelson, 2024; Roorda et al., 2011).

Alongside relational disruption, participants described increasing structural demands as children progress through the system. These included more complex routines, higher expectations and reduced flexibility, which were evident not only at the transition to secondary school, but also across earlier stages as learning becomes more formalised. While this reflects a natural developmental trajectory, participants suggested that increasing demands were not always matched by continued flexibility or support. Instead, progression was experienced as a gradual shift towards more structured and less responsive environments, where children were increasingly expected to manage demands independently. This aligns with research highlighting how less responsive school environments can contribute to school attendance difficulties (Havik et al., 2015b) alongside wider evidence suggesting that education systems may become less able to accommodate individual needs where consistency and accountability are prioritised (DfE, 2024b). Within the current findings, this was experienced as a reduction in responsiveness, limiting opportunities to adapt to early signs of distress.

A further issue identified was the misalignment between attendance systems and children's lived experiences. Participants described how attendance data often

failed to capture the emotional and relational aspects of engagement, particularly where children were physically present but experiencing significant distress or where children were in attendance for the majority of the day but missed the registration cut-off. This reflects wider concerns regarding the limitations of attendance metrics, which tend to prioritise presence over participation and may overlook the underlying emotional and contextual factors influencing engagement (Halligan & Cryer, 2022; Kearney & Graczyk, 2014; Lester & Michelson, 2024). Within the current findings, such measures appeared to obscure early indicators of EBSA, particularly where difficulties were internalised or context-dependent.

This misalignment has important implications for early identification. Where systems rely on thresholds of absence, children experiencing early or partial difficulties may not be recognised until patterns become more entrenched, reinforcing critiques of ‘wait to fail’ approaches within attendance systems (Lester & Michelson, 2024). Participants also highlighted gaps in service provision, particularly for children whose needs were perceived as complex but did not meet thresholds for specialist support. These accounts suggest a fragmentation within systems, where responsibility for support may be unclear and children’s needs may not be fully recognised within existing service structures (Melvin et al., 2019; NAPEP, 2026). This aligns with research highlighting challenges in multi-agency working where service thresholds do not align with lived experience (Hammond-Price et al., 2025; Lester & Michelson, 2024).

In line with an ecological perspective, these findings suggest that EBSA is shaped not only by individual and relational factors, but also by the organisation and interaction of systems. Difficulties may be amplified where there is discontinuity between systems, particularly during transition, or where structures limit flexibility and responsiveness. This reinforces the importance of considering how systems interact, rather than viewing them as separate contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Overall, this study extends existing literature by highlighting how structural and systemic factors can amplify risk within EBSA. While individual and relational factors remain central, they are shaped and constrained by the systems within which they operate. This has important implications for practice and policy, suggesting that

efforts to support attendance must move beyond individual-level intervention towards approaches that address the organisation and interaction of systems themselves.

2.9.7 Development of the *SENSE* Framework

The SENSE framework was developed as a way of integrating the patterns identified across the analysis into a coherent and practice-relevant model. Rather than representing a linear or staged process, the framework reflects the dynamic and overlapping nature of EBSA, capturing how emotional, relational and contextual factors interact over time. It is not intended as a prescriptive sequence of steps, but as a conceptual tool to support understanding and response within complex, real-world contexts.

The framework is grounded directly in the findings of this study, particularly the identification of EBSA as an emergent, ecological and relational process. Each component of SENSE reflects a key dimension of participants' accounts, bringing together patterns observed across themes into a structured way of recognising and responding to early indicators. This approach aligns with the study's broader aim of moving beyond reactive models of attendance intervention, towards earlier, more preventative and contextually informed responses.

The framework comprises five interrelated domains:

S - Spot early indicators

E - Explore context

N - Nurture relationships

S - Scaffold support

E - Enable engagement

Importantly, these domains are not intended to operate sequentially. Instead, they represent interconnected areas of focus that may occur simultaneously, reflecting the non-linear and evolving nature of EBSA. This is consistent with the findings presented in Theme 1, where early indicators were often subtle, fluctuating and easily overlooked. The emphasis on spotting early indicators therefore reflects

the need to recognise patterns over time, rather than relying on threshold-based or attendance-driven identification.

The domain of *exploring context* is informed by findings which highlighted the importance of understanding attendance difficulty as a response to child-environment mismatch. Participants consistently described how emotional, sensory, relational and systemic factors interacted to shape children's experiences of school. This domain therefore emphasises the need to move beyond surface-level interpretations of behaviour, towards a more nuanced and contextualised understanding of how school is experienced by the child.

Nurturing relationships reflects the central role of relational safety identified across the dataset. Relationships were consistently positioned as the primary mechanism through which engagement was either supported or disrupted. This domain foregrounds connection, trust and emotional attunement as foundational to effective response, recognising that children's capacity to engage is closely linked to how safe, understood and supported they feel within their relationships.

The domain of *scaffolding support* draws on findings relating to the flexible and responsive practices described within the primary school contexts in the study. Participants highlighted how small, individualised adaptations, often embedded within everyday interactions, were effective in reducing distress and supporting engagement. The use of the term 'scaffolding' reflects the need for support that is responsive, adaptive and gradually adjusted over time, rather than fixed, generalised or standardised.

Finally, *enabling engagement* reflects a broader conceptualisation of attendance that extends beyond physical presence. The findings highlighted that children may be attending school while experiencing significant distress, suggesting that engagement is not synonymous with attendance. This domain therefore emphasises meaningful participation, shaped by emotional experience, relational context and system-level alignment across family and school.

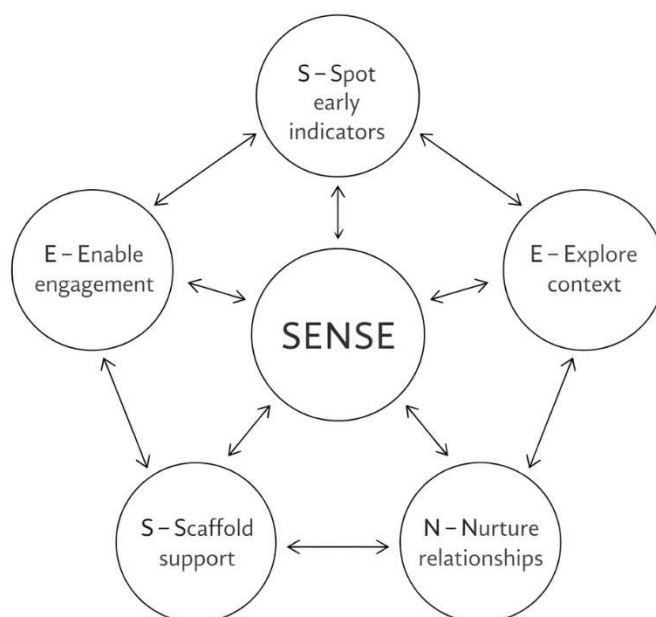
Taken together, the SENSE framework provides a structured yet flexible way of understanding EBSA as a relational and ecological process. It supports the more recent shift away from deficit-oriented or behaviour-focused interpretations, towards approaches that prioritise early identification, contextual understanding and relational

support. In doing so, the framework offers a way of bringing together the complexity of the findings into a form that is both theoretically grounded and practically applicable.

Crucially, the framework (Figure 10) does not seek to simplify EBSA, but to hold its complexity in a way that supports action. By foregrounding early indicators, relational processes and system-level responsiveness, SENSE provides a lens through which practitioners can recognise emerging difficulties and respond in ways that reflect the lived experiences of children and families. It offers a contribution to both understanding and practice, grounded in an ecological perspective and oriented towards early, preventative intervention.

Figure 10

The SENSE Framework: An Interconnected Model for Practice



2.10 Conclusions

The findings presented in this chapter suggest that EBSA is best understood as a dynamic and multi-layered process, rather than a discrete or individualised difficulty. Across the themes, attendance difficulties were described as developing

through ongoing interactions between emotional, relational and contextual factors, rather than occurring as isolated events. These processes unfold over time and across systems, reinforcing the need to move beyond simplified or single-cause explanations of non-attendance.

In relation to the first research question, early signs of EBSA were recognised through subtle and often ambiguous indicators, including somatic complaints, anticipatory anxiety, fluctuating presentation and gradual escalation. These findings are consistent with existing literature which highlights the heterogeneous and often gradual nature of school attendance difficulties (Havik et al., 2014; Heyne et al., 2019). However, this study extends current understanding by demonstrating how early EBSA may be visible prior to sustained non-attendance, embedded within everyday experiences and temporal patterns such as weekend anxiety or morning distress. This suggests that early identification requires attention not only to attendance data, but to shifts in emotional presentation over time.

In relation to the second research question, both parents and school staff consistently understood attendance difficulty as a response to underlying need, rather than as deliberate refusal. Across accounts, EBSA was described as reflecting a mismatch between the child and their environment, shaped by emotional and cognitive overload, sensory experiences, relational dynamics and competing demands across family and school systems. This aligns with ecological and functional models of school attendance difficulties (Kearney, 2008; Pellegrini, 2007), which conceptualise non-attendance as an adaptive response to distress. The current findings build on this by illustrating how these mismatches are experienced in primary school contexts, where early indicators are often subtle, context-dependent and easily overlooked when considered in isolation.

A key contribution of the study is the centrality of relational safety across both understanding and response to EBSA. In relation to the second and third research questions, relationships were not described as peripheral influences, but as shaping whether school felt manageable or overwhelming. Trusted adults supported emotional co-regulation, small and repeated interactions fostered a sense of belonging, and relational continuity reduced uncertainty at key points of transition. While this is consistent with literature highlighting the importance of connection and

school belonging (Allen et al., 2018; Pianta, 1999), the findings extend this by showing how relational safety is actively constructed through everyday practice and how its disruption may contribute to early patterns of avoidance.

In relation to the third research question, schools were described as responding to early EBSA through flexible, relationally informed approaches. These included adaptations to transitions, small, individualised adjustments, informal relational support and a proactive focus on early identification. Such findings align with calls for preventative and needs-led approaches to attendance (Kearney & Graczyk, 2014; DfE, 2024). However, this study develops this understanding by showing how these approaches are enacted in practice within primary school contexts, often through informal and responsive strategies rather than formalised intervention. In this sense, primary schools can be understood as adaptive systems, where flexibility and relational attunement support early engagement.

At the same time, the findings highlight that EBSA is not experienced by the child in isolation. Family experience was central, with parents describing emotional strain, adaptations to daily routines and processes of co-regulation. These findings support existing literature emphasising the systemic nature of attendance difficulties (Kearney, 2008; Heyne et al., 2019), while extending understanding of how these processes operate in the early stages of EBSA. In particular, the findings emphasise the importance of alignment between family and school, with shared understanding and communication supporting more effective responses, and disconnection contributing to increased difficulty.

Finally, the findings highlight the role of wider systems in shaping vulnerability to EBSA. Increased structural demands, reduced flexibility, misalignment between attendance data and lived experience, and fragmentation in service provision were all described as contributing to escalation of difficulty, particularly during periods of transition. This supports existing research identifying transition as a key point of risk (Jindal-Snape, 2018; West et al., 2010), while extending this by highlighting how systemic organisation and expectations may amplify or mitigate early difficulties. In particular, the findings suggest that reliance on attendance metrics alone may obscure early indicators of distress, reinforcing concerns around 'wait to fail' approaches to intervention.

Overall, this study moves understanding of EBSA forward by foregrounding its early, relational and ecological nature. Rather than being defined by absence, EBSA is shown to develop through subtle shifts in emotional experience, relationships and context, which may be present well before attendance declines significantly. This has important implications for practice, suggesting that early identification depends on recognising patterns of distress across systems and over time, and that effective response requires flexible, relational and contextually informed approaches. The SENSE framework was developed from this integrated understanding, providing a structured way of recognising and responding to early EBSA in practice.

2.10.1 Implications for Educational Psychology Practice

The findings from this study have clear implications for educational psychology practice, particularly in relation to early identification, relational approaches and system-level intervention. By conceptualising EBSA as an ecological and relational process, the study highlights the need for approaches that move beyond individualised and reactive models towards more preventative and contextually informed practice (DfE, 2024b; Hammond-Price et al., 2025; Kearney et al., 2022).

A key implication relates to early identification. The findings demonstrate that early indicators of EBSA are often subtle, fluctuating and easily overlooked, especially where attendance remains relatively high, with difficulties often only recognised once patterns become more established (Lester & Michelson, 2024; McDonald & Pervez, 2025). This points to a role for EPs in supporting schools to recognise emerging patterns of difficulty, rather than relying solely on threshold-based indicators such as persistent absence. This may involve working with school staff to develop confidence in identifying early signs of distress, including somatic complaints, anticipatory anxiety and changes in engagement. It also highlights the importance of incorporating multiple perspectives, including parent voice, in developing a fuller understanding of the child's experience (De Los Reyes et al., 2015; Havik et al., 2015b; Heyne et al., 2019).

The findings also highlight the role of relationships in supporting school engagement. Relational safety was consistently identified as a key protective factor, which aligns with research on the importance of teacher-student relationships and

school connectedness in promoting engagement and supporting school attendance ((Cameron et al., 2025). This suggests that EP practice should prioritise relational approaches within schools. Consultation and systemic work may be particularly valuable here, supporting schools to embed relational thinking within everyday practice (Wagner, 2000).

In addition, the identification of child-environment mismatch highlights the value of a contextual and formulation-based approach to assessment. Rather than focusing solely on within-child factors, the findings point to the importance of considering how sensory, relational and structural aspects of the school environment interact with individual needs. This is consistent with transactional and ecological models of development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Kearney et al., 2022; Sameroff, 2009), as well as EP practice frameworks which emphasise collaborative formulation (Kelly, 2017; MacKay et al., 2016). EPs can support this by bringing together perspectives from family and school to develop a shared and contextually grounded understanding of the factors influencing attendance.

The findings also indicate that flexibility and adaptation within school systems play an important role in preventing escalation. This aligns with more recent research highlighting the value of early, needs-led and contextually responsive approaches to attendance difficulties (DfE, 2024b; Kearney et al., 2022; van Poortvliet, 2025). EPs may therefore support schools to develop flexible and individualised responses, including adjustments to routines, expectations and environments. At the same time, the findings suggest a need to consider how these approaches can be embedded more consistently and intentionally across settings, through whole-school practices and policies, rather than relying on individual staff members or relationships.

Family systems also emerged as central within the findings across both parent and staff participants, confirming that EP practice should actively include and support parents as part of intervention. This is supported by literature emphasising the importance of parent-school collaboration in addressing school attendance difficulties (DfE, 2024b; Havik et al., 2015b; Heyne et al., 2019). EPs can play an important role in facilitating shared understanding between family and school, supporting communication and recognising the emotional impact of EBSA on families (Sawyer & Collingwood, 2024). This aligns with systemic approaches to practice,

where change is understood as occurring through interactions between systems rather than within individuals alone (Kelly et al., 2016; Pellegrini, 2007).

Finally, the findings highlight the influence of wider systems and structures, particularly in relation to transition and service provision. This reflects broader concerns within the literature regarding fragmentation of services and challenges in multi-agency working (DfE, 2024b; Kearney et al., 2022; Lester & Michelson, 2024). EPs can contribute to system-level thinking by working with schools and local authorities to consider how policies, thresholds and practices may shape early intervention. This may include contributing to strategic development, supporting transitions and promoting more integrated approaches to support (Kelly, 2017).

The SENSE framework provides a useful structure for supporting this work in practice. By bringing together early identification, contextual understanding, relational support and adaptive approaches, the framework offers a way of organising professional thinking that is both accessible and grounded in the complexity of EBSA. While not intended as a prescriptive model, it aligns with consultation-based and systemic approaches within EP practice, supporting practitioners to work flexibly across systems (Kelly, 2017; Wagner, 2000).

Overall, the findings indicate that EP practice has an important role in supporting earlier, more relational and more ecologically informed responses to EBSA. By working across systems, supporting shared understanding and promoting flexibility within practice, EPs are well placed to contribute to more preventative and effective approaches to school attendance difficulties (Kearney et al., 2022; NAPEP, 2026).

2.10.2 The SENSE Framework: A Conceptual Contribution to Understanding and Responding to EBSA

The SENSE framework represents a key outcome of this study, offering a way of conceptualising EBSA as an ecological and relational process. Grounded in the findings, the framework brings together the emotional, relational, contextual and temporal dimensions identified across themes into a structured model for understanding and responding to early indicators of difficulty.

Earlier literature has provided a range of models for understanding school attendance difficulties, often drawing on behavioural, clinical, or systemic perspectives (Heyne, 2019; Heyne et al., 2019; Kearney, 2008). While these models have contributed valuable insight into the development and maintenance of non-attendance, they have been critiqued for focusing primarily on more established patterns, with comparatively less attention given to the early stages where difficulties may be emerging (Lester & Michelson, 2024). More recent frameworks have begun to conceptualise EBSA as a complex, context-dependent phenomenon shaped by interacting individual, school, and systemic factors, emphasising the importance of early identification and ecological understanding (Hamilton, 2024; Hammond-Price et al., 2025). Building on this, a central contribution of the SENSE framework is that it is explicitly oriented towards early identification, reflecting the findings of this study which demonstrate the subtle and evolving nature of EBSA and position it as a dynamic interaction between systems.

The five domains of SENSE provide a way of organising these processes in a way that is both conceptually coherent and practically accessible. *Spotting early indicators* reflects the importance of recognising subtle and fluctuating signs of distress, which may not be captured through traditional attendance measures. This extends existing literature by foregrounding the temporal dimension of EBSA, highlighting how early patterns may be visible before difficulties become formally recognised.

Exploring context builds on the identification of child-environment mismatch, emphasising the need to understand behaviour in relation to the systems within which it occurs. This aligns with systemic approaches to assessment, which prioritise context over individual deficit and emphasise the interaction between the child and their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Within the current study, this was particularly evident in relation to sensory, relational and structural factors, which participants identified as important influences on school-connectedness.

Nurturing relationships reflects the central role of relational safety identified across the findings. While the importance of relationships is well established within the literature (Chian et al., 2024; Corcoran, 2024), the current study extends this by positioning relationships as the primary mechanism through which engagement is

supported or disrupted. This shifts the focus from intervention as something that is ‘done to’ the child, towards an understanding of support as something that is co-constructed within relationships.

Scaffolding support captures the flexible and adaptive practices described within primary school contexts. This aligns with research highlighting the importance of responsive and needs-led approaches, particularly in the early stages of difficulty (Ingul et al., 2019; Trafford Services for Education, 2021). However, the findings also suggest that such practices are often informal and dependent on individual staff, raising questions about how they can be embedded more consistently within systems.

Finally, *enabling engagement* reflects a shift away from attendance as a binary outcome, towards a more nuanced understanding of participation and engagement. This is consistent with EBSA literature which challenges attendance-focused models, which may overlook the qualitative aspects of engagement (Barriers to Education, 2025; Lester & Michelson, 2024). Within the current study, engagement was shaped by emotional experience, relational context and system-level factors, suggesting that presence alone is not a sufficient indicator of success.

The SENSE framework offers a way of integrating these domains into a coherent approach which reflects the complexity of EBSA. The framework is not intended to be prescriptive. Instead, it is designed to support professional thinking, enabling practitioners to interpret and respond to early indicators in a way that is sensitive to context and grounded in relational understanding.

The framework has practicable relevance for educational psychology practice. EPs are well-positioned to work across systems, supporting schools and families to develop shared understanding and coordinated responses. The emphasis within SENSE on early identification, relational processes and system alignment aligns closely with this role, offering a model that is both theoretically informed and practically applicable.

However, it is important to acknowledge that the framework is developed from a relatively small and context-specific dataset and therefore will not capture the full range of experiences associated with EBSA. Further research is needed to explore

how the framework applies across different contexts, including secondary settings and more diverse populations.

Overall, the SENSE framework represents a conceptual contribution to the literature on EBSA, offering a way of understanding attendance difficulties that moves beyond individualised and reactive models. By foregrounding early indicators, relational processes and ecological context, it provides a foundation for more preventative and responsive approaches to supporting children's engagement with school.

Thirdly, the ecological framework provides a foundation for the development of the SENSE framework, which seeks to integrate ecological, relational and emotional dimensions of EBSA into a coherent model for practice. In doing so, the framework reflects the importance of understanding EBSA as shaped through interactions across systems, underpinned by relationships and experienced through children's emotional responses to their environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Pellegrini, 2007). This is consistent with research which emphasises the role of collaboration, communication and individualised support in responding to attendance difficulties (Heyne et al., 2020; Ingul et al., 2019).

Drawing on both research and practice-based guidance, the development of the SENSE framework also aligns with approaches that prioritise partnership working and mutual understanding between families and schools. Such approaches are increasingly recognised as central to improving attendance outcomes, particularly where emotional factors underpin non-attendance (DfE, 2024b; Heyne et al., 2020). By bringing these elements together, the framework aims to support practitioners in recognising early indicators of EBSA and responding in ways that reflect the complexity of children's experiences. This is particularly relevant for EPs, who are often working across systems to support shared understanding and coordinated responses.

2.10.3 Strengths and Limitations

This study offers several methodological and conceptual strengths, particularly its focus on early indicators of EBSA, its multi-perspective design and its

alignment with an ecological and critical realist framework. At the same time, a number of limitations should be considered.

A key strength lies in its focus on the early stages of EBSA, an area that remains underrepresented within the literature. Much existing research has focused on more entrenched patterns of non-attendance, often at the point where intervention becomes reactive (Heyne et al., 2020; Lester & Michelson, 2024). By exploring early indicators within primary school contexts, this study contributes to a growing emphasis on preventative approaches and early intervention (Kearney et al., 2022; NAPEP, 2026).

A further strength is the inclusion of multiple perspectives, specifically those of parents and school staff. This reflects ecological approaches, which emphasise understanding behaviour across interacting systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Pellegrini, 2007). Bringing these perspectives together highlights both alignment and divergence across contexts, supporting a richer understanding of EBSA across the home-school mesosystem. However, the distinction between parent and professional perspectives was not always clear-cut. Several participants occupied dual roles as both school staff and parents of children who were experiencing, or had previously experienced, EBSA. These participants moved between their professional and parental perspectives, including reflecting on how their experiences as parents informed their own approaches to supporting children in school and comparing these with the support experienced by their own children. This dual positioning provided valuable insight into the home-school mesosystem but may also have influenced how participants interpreted and described EBSA. Their accounts therefore reflect perspectives shaped by experience across both contexts rather than wholly distinct parent or professional positions.

The use of qualitative methods through RTA enabled the generation of rich, detailed accounts of EBSA as experienced across family and school contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Braun & Clarke, 2022). This was particularly valuable given the subtle and evolving nature of early EBSA. The development of the SENSE framework further strengthens the study, providing a coherent and practice-relevant model grounded in participants' experiences.

At the same time, the focus on early indicators presents an important methodological challenge. Some participants were reflecting on children for whom EBSA had subsequently become more established and were asked to consider the first signs that they had noticed and now understood as possible early indications of difficulty. Knowledge of the child's later trajectory may have influenced how these earlier experiences were interpreted, meaning that behaviours which appeared significant in hindsight may not have been understood in the same way at the time. This is particularly important when interpreting the findings, as the identification of possible early indicators should not imply that these necessarily predict later attendance difficulties. Rather, they may indicate a need for responsive, low-level support addressing the difficulty the child is experiencing at that time, without assuming that these difficulties will necessarily develop into more established EBSA.

Relatedly, the study relied partly on retrospective accounts, which may be affected by recall and reconstruction. Participants' recollections of earlier experiences may have been shaped by subsequent events, particularly where attendance difficulties later became entrenched. During interviews, participants were supported to reconstruct chronology by considering when difficulties were first noticed, experiences around particular school years and transitions, and what occurred before attendance itself began to decline. Nevertheless, these approaches cannot remove the limitations associated with retrospective recall. The findings therefore represent participants' current interpretations of earlier experiences rather than an objective reconstruction of the development of EBSA.

A further limitation concerns the level at which experiences were explored. School staff discussed both general patterns observed across children and examples of particular children and their trajectories. Exploring patterns across professional experience was valuable in identifying common features and practices but may have reduced attention to the individual combination of child, family and school factors operating within particular cases. More detailed case-based research could enable closer consideration of individual needs and how influences across ecological systems interact over time. In particular, longitudinal research following children prospectively across home and school contexts could extend the current findings and reduce reliance on retrospective identification of early indicators. Such a design

was beyond the scope and timeframe of the current study but represents a valuable direction for future research.

Further limitations relate to the study sample and participant perspectives. The sample size was relatively small and drawn from a limited number of schools within a single Local Authority, which may limit transferability. In addition, the study relied on adult perspectives, and the absence of direct child voice means that children's experiences are interpreted indirectly (Lundy, 2007). While this reflects the challenges of accessing child voice at early stages of EBSA, it remains a limitation.

The use of a focus group also introduced potential limitations associated with group dynamics. The focus group consisted of support staff and an Early Years teacher who worked closely with classroom assistants, rather than including senior members of staff. While this reduced the potential influence of formal differences in seniority, existing professional relationships and differences in confidence may still have influenced participants' willingness to express disagreement or offer alternative perspectives. Group interaction may therefore have strengthened apparent areas of consensus while making some divergent views less visible. During facilitation, quieter participants were actively invited to contribute and participants were encouraged to build upon or offer different perspectives to those already expressed. However, the potential influence of the group context on participants' responses cannot be fully discounted.

The survey component also made a limited contribution due to low response rates, resulting in a more qualitatively driven study than originally intended. While this supported depth of understanding, it reduced the ability to identify broader patterns. The flexible approach to data collection, while pragmatic, meant that the survey did not function as a distinct preliminary phase as planned. This development should also be understood within the practical constraints of doctoral research. The defined timeframe for completion, alongside the demands of professional training and placement, school availability, difficulties releasing staff and challenges recruiting parents, required pragmatic decisions about recruitment and data collection. In particular, the planned reliance on individual interviews was expanded to include a focus group to facilitate staff participation within the practical context of schools. Recruitment was also broadened in response to limited engagement with

the survey. These adaptations enabled the research to remain responsive and viable but also shaped the resulting dataset and the balance between methods. With a longer timeframe, there would have been greater opportunity to review and restructure the survey component in response to initial engagement and to extend recruitment and data collection.

Finally, the researcher's positionality as a TEP may have influenced interpretation, including sensitivity to relational and systemic aspects of participants' accounts. Reflexive processes were used throughout to consider how professional experience and theoretical assumptions shaped interpretation, recognising that complete researcher neutrality is neither assumed nor sought within reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This is considered in greater depth in Chapter 3 (Section 3.2).

Overall, these limitations define the context within which the findings should be interpreted and highlight areas for further research. The study nevertheless offers a contextually grounded and ecologically informed account of early EBSA, with clear relevance for practice and future development.

2.10.4 Future Research

The findings from this study highlight several areas for future research, particularly in relation to early identification, systemic understanding and the development of practice-informed frameworks for EBSA.

Firstly, further research is needed to explore how relational and preventative approaches to EBSA can be sustained across key transition points, particularly the move from primary to secondary school. While the current study highlights the protective role of flexibility and relational continuity within primary settings, these conditions are often disrupted during transition, where school structures become more structurally complex (Havik et al., 2015b). Future research could therefore examine how relational, early intervention approaches might be embedded within transition processes and the early stages of secondary education. In particular, there is scope to explore how proactive, relationship-based practices can be maintained or adapted to support continuity of experience, enabling early indicators of EBSA to be recognised and responded to before patterns of non-attendance become

established. This would extend current understanding by focusing not only on how EBSA presents in secondary contexts, but on how protective practices might be intentionally sustained across systems.

Secondly, the absence of direct child voice within the current study highlights an important area for further investigation. While parent and school staff perspectives provide valuable insight, research which directly captures children's experiences may offer a more nuanced understanding of how EBSA is perceived and lived. This is particularly important given the findings which suggest that children's internal experiences, including anxiety and perceived relational disconnection, may not always be visible within adult accounts (Havik et al., 2015a; Heyne et al., 2019).

Future research could also explore the role of neurodivergence within early indicators of EBSA in greater depth. The identification of sensory and contextual mismatch within the findings suggests that some children may experience school environments in ways that are not always fully recognised within everyday school systems and responses. This is particularly relevant given that neurodivergent profiles are often identified during the primary school years, a period in which the demands of the school environment are also increasing. As children progress through primary education, school expectations typically become increasingly formalised, with greater emphasis on sustained attention, collaborative learning, reduced physical movement and adherence to structured routines (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). For some children, this shift may result in a growing mismatch between individual needs and environmental demands, which may in turn contribute to increased anxiety and reduced engagement with school (Ashburner et al., 2008; Havik et al., 2015b).

Research which explores EBSA through a neurodiversity-informed and developmental lens may therefore provide important insight into how these processes unfold over time (Fielding et al., 2025). There is scope to explore the parallels between increasing environmental demands and the emergence of anxiety within the school context, as well as how school systems might adapt to better accommodate a wider range of neurodivergent needs (Sideropoulos et al., 2025). Such research would support a more nuanced understanding of EBSA, moving

beyond static explanations towards an appreciation of how fit between child and environment may shift across development.

The SENSE framework developed within this study also provides a basis for future research. Further work is needed to explore how the framework can be applied within practice, including its usefulness in supporting consultation, assessment and intervention. This may involve piloting the framework within educational psychology services or school contexts and evaluating its impact on early identification and response to EBSA. Practice-based research could also explore how the framework is experienced by practitioners, parents and children and whether it supports shared understanding across systems.

Finally, future research may benefit from adopting longitudinal designs, which would enable exploration of how EBSA develops over time. The current findings suggest that early indicators emerge gradually and may fluctuate before becoming more established. Longitudinal cohort or case-based research following individual children prospectively across home and school contexts could provide valuable insight into these trajectories, including how individual needs and contextual influences interact over time. This could support a deeper understanding of how early experiences relate to later patterns of attendance while reducing reliance on retrospective accounts.

Overall, future research should continue to build on ecological and relational understandings of EBSA, with a particular focus on early identification and system-level intervention. By extending the focus beyond established non-attendance, there is potential to develop more preventative and responsive approaches which better reflect the complexity of children's experiences and support proactive measures.

2.10.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter has outlined the methodological approach adopted to explore early indicators of EBSA within primary school contexts. The research design evolved from an initially planned two-part research process into a more qualitatively led approach, enabling an in-depth and contextually grounded exploration of participants' experiences.

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews, a focus group and a supplementary parent survey, capturing the perspectives of both parents and school staff. In line with the ecological framework underpinning the study, this multi-perspective design enabled exploration of how EBSA is recognised and responded to across interacting family and school systems.

The study was grounded within a critical realist framework, with RTA used to develop patterns of meaning through reflexive engagement with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Braun & Clarke, 2022). This approach supported a nuanced understanding of EBSA as an emergent process, shaped by emotional, relational and contextual factors.

In addressing the research aims, the study identified key features of early EBSA, including anticipatory anxiety, the central role of relational safety and the influence of interactions between home and school. These findings highlight the importance of early identification, alongside flexible, relational and collaborative approaches to support.

A central contribution of the study is the development of the SENSE framework, which integrates these findings into a structured and practice-oriented model. Grounded in participants' experiences, the framework offers a way of supporting early identification and response within applied contexts.

The chapter has also acknowledged several limitations, including the small, localised sample, reliance on adult perspectives and the limited contribution of the survey. These factors have been considered in interpreting the findings and highlight areas for future research.

Overall, the study positions EBSA as a relational and ecological process, shaped through interactions across systems and unfolding over time. By focusing on early indicators, it contributes to a more nuanced and practice-relevant understanding of EBSA, supporting the development of earlier and more preventative approaches.

Chapter 3: Reflective Account

3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a critical and reflexive account of the research process, examining how methodological decisions, researcher positioning and contextual factors shaped both the development of the study and the interpretation of findings. In doing so, it moves beyond describing what was done to consider how knowledge was constructed within the research, in line with its critical realist positioning and recognition of the active role of the researcher in the interpretation of participants' accounts.

Particular attention is given to how my professional background and prior experiences have influenced the research process. Having had a teaching background in primary education, where relational understanding and informal, responsive support practices are often central yet not always explicitly recognised, I was particularly interested in the more subtle and relational aspects of children's experiences. This influenced how early indicators of Emotional Barriers to School Attendance (EBSA) were noticed, interpreted and prioritised within the study. Adopting a reflexive stance therefore allows for consideration of both the insights this perspective enabled, and the ways in which it may have shaped or constrained the analysis.

The chapter also reflects on how the study contributes to understanding early EBSA, particularly in relation to the relational and systemic processes discussed within the findings. In doing so, it considers the implications of the research for educational psychology practice, as well as identifying areas for further research.

The chapter is structured around key aspects of the research process, including reflexivity, methodological decision-making and evaluation of the study's strengths and limitations. It concludes by reflecting on my professional learning and the contribution of the study to both theory and practice.

3.2 Reflexivity and Researcher Positioning

My position as a TEP influenced both the research process and the interpretation of findings. My prior experience of working with children with EBSA

contributed to my contextual understanding, particularly of the relational and systemic influences shaping their experiences. However, I recognise that this positioning also introduced the potential for pre-existing assumptions to shape how the data were interpreted and which aspects were foregrounded during analysis.

Prior to training on the doctorate, I worked as a primary school teacher. Through this experience, I became increasingly aware of the relational nature of school environments, particularly within primary settings. The ability of school staff to 'read' children's emotional states, often through subtle and non-verbal cues, felt like an implicit and largely unspoken aspect of practice. This relational attunement appeared to operate beneath formal systems yet played a significant role in shaping children's experiences of school.

I was particularly struck by the role of support staff and office staff, who often absorbed and responded to both children's and parents' emotional needs. These interactions were rarely captured within formal systems of support or attendance processes yet appeared central to enabling children to access school. This experience informed my interest in early EBSA and contributed to a focus on relational processes within the study.

In addition, I had observed how small, informal adjustments within school systems could significantly influence children's ability to engage. These included practices such as assigning a small task on arrival, offering flexible entry points, maintaining communication with parents, or establishing predictable relational routines. While these adaptive practices were not typically formalised, they appeared to function as meaningful mechanisms of individualised support. This may have sensitised me to identifying these 'micro-adjustments' within the data and interpreting them as significant rather than incidental.

While I was teaching, I had a child in my Year 6 class who experienced significant difficulty attending school. Over the course of a particularly challenging week, considerable relational work had taken place to support him to re-engage, and he eventually came into the classroom for registration.

At that point, a member of senior leadership, who did not yet have an established relationship with the child or an understanding of his wider context, approached and reminded him that he should be wearing a school jumper, offering

one from lost property for the day. While this interaction was intended to uphold school policy, it stood in contrast to the relational work that had enabled the child to attend at all.

This moment is an example of how, within complex systems, well-intentioned adherence to policy can inadvertently undermine relational progress if not attuned to context. It reinforced for me the importance of relational flexibility, and the need for school systems to recognise when responsiveness and attunement may need to take precedence over consistency of rule application.

This positioning aligns with the study's critical realist framework, which recognises that understandings of experience are shaped through interaction and context, and that the researcher plays an active role in the interpretative process. From this perspective, interpretation is not neutral but shaped through engagement with participants' accounts. At the same time, a critical realist position supports consideration of both observable experiences and the underlying mechanisms which may shape them. This required careful attention during analysis to the relationship between participants' subjective accounts and interpretation of the broader processes influencing EBSA.

Reflexivity was therefore maintained throughout the research process. Reflexive field notes were used to critically examine emerging interpretations, emotional responses and analytic decisions, supporting ongoing awareness of how meaning was being constructed. This was particularly important during data analysis, where patterns relating to relational safety, early indicators and system-level influences began to emerge. While these patterns were grounded in participants' accounts, I remained mindful that my prior experience may have influenced the prominence they held within the analysis.

My positioning may have led me to prioritise relational and systemic interpretations of EBSA, particularly in relation to early identification and preventative practice. For example, the prominence of relational safety within the findings may reflect both participants' accounts and my own professional attunement to its significance. Similarly, the emphasis on flexible, relationally informed responses within primary school contexts may have been shaped by my experience of these environments. While these interpretations were supported by the data, I remained

aware of the possibility that alternative explanations may have been less visible within my analytic lens.

To address this, I returned to the data throughout the analytic process, ensuring that themes were grounded in participants' accounts rather than imposed upon them. Attention was also given to areas of divergence within the dataset, particularly in relation to systemic constraints and structural demands, which provided a counterbalance to more relational interpretations. This supported a more nuanced understanding of EBSA as both relational and systemic, rather than privileging a single explanatory lens.

I also considered the influence of power dynamics within the research. My dual role within the Local Authority may have influenced how participants perceived me, and in turn how they presented their experiences, particularly in relation to school systems and professional practice. Participants may have moderated their responses, emphasised particular aspects of their experience or avoided criticism. To mitigate this, I emphasised the exploratory and non-evaluative nature of the study. However, I recognise that such dynamics cannot be fully removed and may have influenced the data generated.

Reflexivity also shaped the development of the SENSE framework. While grounded in participants' accounts, its construction was influenced by my professional perspective and prior experience of working within school systems. In particular, the emphasis on relational safety, early identification and system-level responsiveness reflects both the findings and the personal and professional importance I place on these aspects of practice. This supports the co-constructed nature of the framework, where meaning is shaped through the interaction between data and researcher interpretation.

At the same time, this raises questions about the extent to which the framework reflects the data versus the researcher's perspective. I therefore sought to ensure that the framework remained closely aligned with participants' accounts, while acknowledging that it represents an interpretative synthesis rather than a direct representation of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Overall, reflexivity was not treated as a discrete stage of the research process, but as an ongoing and integral component of it. This supported a more

critically informed interpretation of the data, acknowledging both the value and limitations of the researcher's perspective. The study reflects a co-constructed understanding of EBSA, shaped through the interaction between participants' experiences and the researcher's interpretive lens. These reflections on researcher positioning directly informed methodological decisions, which are considered in the following section.

3.3 Methodological Reflections

The design of this study evolved over the course of the research process, reflecting both the complexity of the research focus and the practical realities of conducting research within applied educational contexts. While the study was initially conceived as a two-part research process, incorporating a parent survey followed by qualitative interviews, this design evolved as the research progressed. The survey was intended to provide an overview of trends across the participating schools, while also offering parents the opportunity to indicate whether they would be willing to participate in a subsequent qualitative interview. However, limited engagement with the survey, alongside challenges in capturing the nuanced and context-dependent nature of early EBSA, led to a greater emphasis on qualitative data. This resulted in a qualitatively led design, enabling a more in-depth exploration of participants' experiences.

The introduction of a focus group also reflected the need for the research design to remain responsive to the practical context of schools. While individual interviews were originally planned, support staff were more easily released collectively at times when their roles could be covered, whereas senior staff had greater flexibility to participate individually. The focus group therefore developed initially as a pragmatic response to staff availability. However, it also offered an additional benefit by enabling participants to respond to and build upon each other's experiences, generating insight into shared professional understandings and practices.

These adaptations highlight an important methodological consideration when researching early EBSA. The findings suggest that early indicators are often subtle, fluctuating and embedded within everyday experiences, making them difficult to capture through structured or standardised tools. On reflection, the survey questions

were more closely aligned with more visible or established forms of EBSA and did not sufficiently capture the early, less overt stages that became central to the study. In addition, the length and specificity of the questionnaire may have limited participation, potentially resulting in a sample skewed towards respondents with more established concerns. While the survey was a valuable tool in principle, a more effective approach may have been to use a shorter, broader set of questions to encourage wider engagement and capture a greater range of experiences.

This development also reflects a broader alignment with the study's epistemological positioning. While the survey was included to provide an overview of patterns across participants and to frame the qualitative work, the study's critical realist positioning recognises that participants' understandings are shaped by their experiences and the contexts in which these occur. As such, qualitative methods were central to exploring how early EBSA is understood and experienced across contexts.

Rather than representing a fundamental shift in design, the reduced emphasis on the survey reflects a clarification of its role within the study. The survey provided contextual insight into broader patterns, while the qualitative data supported a more in-depth exploration of how early EBSA is experienced and understood. Together, these approaches offered a complementary perspective, capturing both overarching trends and the relational, context-dependent nature of early EBSA.

The evolving design reflects the iterative and responsive nature of qualitative research, where methodological decisions are shaped by the research context rather than fixed at the outset. While this flexibility supported the development of a more nuanced understanding of EBSA, it also introduced limitations. In particular, the reduced role of the survey limited the extent to which broader survey patterns could be considered alongside the qualitative findings. However, this represents a deliberate methodological trade-off, prioritising depth of interpretation over breadth of coverage, and aligning with the study's epistemological positioning.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit staff participants with direct experience of EBSA within primary school contexts. This approach was aligned with the exploratory aims of the study, prioritising relevance and depth of insight over representativeness. Three schools were selected from within the locality

in which I was working and were known to the educational psychology service to be proactive in their approaches to EBSA. This knowledge was informed through previous work undertaken with the schools, as well as through discussions within regular link meetings. Selecting schools in this way ensured that participants were able to draw on meaningful and practice-based experiences, supporting the generation of rich qualitative data grounded in real-world contexts.

However, this sampling approach also introduces several considerations. Recruitment through schools meant that schools acted as gatekeepers to both staff and families. While this facilitated access and supported participation, it may have influenced who felt able or willing to take part. For example, staff who engaged may have been more confident, reflective or already attuned to issues relating to EBSA. This raises the possibility that the sample may not have included staff who did not perceive EBSA as part of their role, despite the relational framing of this study suggesting that responsibility for supporting attendance is distributed across the whole school system.

Similarly, parent participants may have been more likely to represent those with more established attendance concerns, or those who felt either particularly supported or unsupported by the school. As a result, certain perspectives, particularly those less engaged with, or less aware of, early EBSA, may be underrepresented within the data.

In addition, the focus on schools already engaged with attendance and wellbeing may have resulted in a sample that reflects more proactive or relationally attuned practice than might be evident more widely. As such, the study may present a more developed picture of practice than is typical across all settings. However, within a qualitative framework, the aim was not to achieve generalisability, but to develop a detailed and contextually grounded understanding of early EBSA. The findings should therefore be understood as illustrative rather than representative, offering insight into how EBSA is experienced and interpreted within specific contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Lincoln, 2005).

The inclusion of both parent and school staff perspectives was a deliberate methodological decision, grounded in the ecological framework underpinning the study. EBSA is experienced across family and school contexts, and capturing these

perspectives enabled exploration of how early indicators are recognised and interpreted within and between systems. This supported identification of both shared understandings and points of divergence, contributing to a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon.

Over the course of the study, my use of terminology evolved in response to both professional developments and the practical realities of conducting research within a rapidly changing field. Initially, I adopted the term Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA), reflecting its established use within the literature and its familiarity across school contexts. However, within my service there has been a shift towards the term Barriers to Education, aligned with recent local and national developments. While this reframing reflects an important move away from more deficit-oriented and within-child explanations towards a broader, systemic understanding, I found it difficult to adopt fully within the research context. In practice, the relative novelty of the term meant it was not widely recognised by participants, which at times created a disconnect between professional discourse and the language used within schools. This highlighted for me how professional language can shape understanding but may not always align with how experiences are described in practice.

Through further reading and reflection, I adopted the term emotional barriers to school attendance as a pragmatic bridge between established and emerging discourse. While not without limitations, this allowed me to remain sensitive to participants' perspectives while also aligning with a more relational and needs-based framing. This process prompted reflection on the role of language within educational psychology practice, not simply as descriptive, but as shaping how difficulties are understood and responded to. It also reinforced the importance of maintaining flexibility in terminology, particularly in areas where conceptualisations are still evolving. Overall, this shift reflects the dynamic nature of the field, where language continues to develop across research, policy and practice contexts.

In the original research proposal, there was an intention to explore EBSA across a wider range of ecological systems. This included greater focus on exosystemic influences, such as school policies, attendance procedures and wider political discourse surrounding attendance. In addition, it was considered important

to include the child's voice in order to develop a more complete understanding of the ecological systems surrounding the child and to centre the child within the research process, reflecting a core principle of educational psychology practice (UNCRC, 1989).

However, through feedback, supervision and ongoing reflection, the scope of the study was refined. This reflected a recognition that prioritising depth over breadth would allow for a more meaningful exploration of early EBSA. The decision not to include children's voices was not due to a lack of importance, but rather related to the specific focus on early EBSA. At this stage, children may not yet be aware of the potential impact of their experiences on attendance, and recruiting participants at this early point in the trajectory would have presented practical and ethical challenges. Alternative approaches were considered, including the use of focus groups to explore children's general experiences of school; however, this was ultimately not pursued in order to maintain a clear focus on the mesosystem interactions between family and school.

Within this more focused exploration of the mesosystem, it is also important to acknowledge that parent and school staff perspectives are not equivalent. Each reflects a different position within the child's ecological context, shaped by distinct forms of access, responsibility and interpretation. Parents may have greater insight into children's emotional experiences within the home, while school staff may be more attuned to behavioural and contextual factors within the school environment. Rather than viewing these differences as inconsistencies to be resolved, they were understood as complementary perspectives, offering insight into the complexity of EBSA as it is experienced across systems.

Data collection methods were selected to capture both individual experiences and shared professional understandings. Semi-structured interviews formed the primary method of data collection, enabling in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives. This approach aligns with the study's epistemological positioning, allowing participants to describe their experiences in their own terms while enabling the researcher to explore emerging areas in greater depth through follow-up questions.

Interviews were conducted both in person and online, depending on participant preference and availability. This flexibility supported accessibility, particularly given the demands on both parents and school staff. However, the use of different formats may have introduced variability within the data. Online interviews may have limited access to non-verbal communication and influenced the development of rapport, while in-person interviews may have facilitated more natural interaction. These differences were considered during analysis, with attention paid to how context may have shaped participants' responses.

Methodologically, the focus group format enabled participants to build on one another's contributions, generating discussion that may not have emerged within individual interviews. This was particularly valuable in exploring how EBSA is understood within school systems and how practices are shaped through shared professional dialogue. Focus groups also supported the exploration of collective meaning-making, highlighting how understanding of EBSA may be shaped through professional interaction within teams rather than solely at an individual level.

However, focus groups also introduce methodological challenges. Group dynamics may influence participation, with some voices shaping the direction of discussion more strongly than others. Participants may also moderate their responses in the presence of colleagues, particularly where discussions relate to shared practice or organisational processes. This may result in certain perspectives being underrepresented or expressed more cautiously. These factors were considered during both facilitation and analysis, with efforts made to create an open and inclusive environment while recognising the influence of context on the data generated.

Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse the data, providing a flexible and interpretative approach to identifying patterns of meaning. This approach aligns with the study's epistemological positioning, recognising that themes are actively constructed through the interaction between researcher and data. The iterative nature of the analysis allowed for ongoing engagement with the data, supporting the development of themes that captured both participants' experiences and the underlying processes shaping them.

The analytic process involved repeated engagement with the data, moving between coding, theme development and interpretation. This supported the identification of patterns relating to early indicators of EBSA, relational processes and system-level influences. At the same time, care was taken to ensure that themes remained grounded in participants' accounts. This involved returning to the data throughout the analysis, considering both consistency and divergence within the dataset.

Importantly, the identification of themes reflects both the data and the interpretative lens applied. For example, the prominence of relational safety and flexible adaptation within the findings may reflect both participants' accounts and the researcher's sensitivity to these aspects of practice. To address this, attention was given to alternative interpretations and to areas of the data that did not align with initial assumptions. In particular, the inclusion of themes relating to structural demands and systemic constraints provided a counterbalance, supporting a more comprehensive and critically informed understanding of EBSA.

Alternative methodological approaches could have included the use of child-centred methods, such as play-based or visual approaches, which may have enabled more direct access to children's perspectives. However, this would require careful ethical consideration given the focus on early and potentially distressing experiences, as well as the practical challenge of identifying and recruiting children at this early stage. A larger-scale quantitative or mixed-methods design may also have supported broader generalisation; however, this would likely have reduced the depth of insight into the relational and contextual processes central to this study.

Overall, the methodological approach supported a nuanced and contextually grounded exploration of early EBSA. While shaped by its specific context and design, the study provides insight into the relational, emotional and systemic processes that underpin early attendance difficulties. In doing so, it contributes to a growing body of literature that positions EBSA as a dynamic and ecological phenomenon, rather than a discrete or individualised issue (Heyne et al., 2020; Onslow & Cartmell, 2025). Building on these methodological considerations, the following section evaluates how rigour was established and maintained throughout the study.

3.4 Methodological Rigour

Methodological rigour within this study was considered in relation to credibility, transparency and reflexivity, consistent with the qualitative and reflexive orientation of the research. Rather than seeking objectivity or replication, rigour was conceptualised in terms of the depth, coherence and trustworthiness of the analysis, and the extent to which interpretations were meaningfully grounded in participants' accounts while acknowledging the role of the researcher in their construction.

Credibility was supported through the generation of rich qualitative data and the use of verbatim extracts, ensuring that interpretations remained closely connected to participants' accounts. The inclusion of both parent and school staff perspectives further strengthened credibility by enabling exploration of how early EBSA is recognised and understood across different contexts. This facilitated consideration of both shared and divergent experiences, supporting a more nuanced and ecologically grounded interpretation. Credibility within this study is not understood as reflecting an objective account of reality, but as the plausibility and resonance of the interpretations developed (Lincoln, 1985).

Transparency was achieved through a clear and systematic account of the research process, including data collection and the iterative development of codes and themes. The analytic process was documented in a way that enables the reader to follow how interpretations were constructed, supporting coherence between the data, analysis and final themes. This is particularly important within reflexive thematic analysis, where themes are actively generated rather than discovered, and therefore require explicit articulation of the analytic decisions underpinning them (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Reflexivity remained central to maintaining rigour and is discussed in detail in the preceding section. Ongoing critical reflection supported awareness of how the researcher's positioning and assumptions may have shaped interpretation. This was particularly relevant in relation to the prominence of relational and systemic patterns within the data. Engaging reflexively throughout the analytic process supported a balance between remaining grounded in participants' accounts and acknowledging the interpretative role of the researcher.

The methodological approach, analytic process and final interpretations were aligned with the study's critical realist positioning. This supported an analysis that attended both to participants' experiences and to the underlying mechanisms which may shape those experiences. Holding these perspectives together enabled a layered interpretation of EBSA, while also requiring careful consideration of the relationship between participants' subjective meanings and the researcher's interpretation of their accounts.

Finally, the study sought to maintain practical relevance. The development of the SENSE framework provides a clear link between the findings and applied educational psychology practice, supporting the usefulness of the research beyond the immediate study context. Rigour is reflected not only in the quality and coherence of the analysis, but also in the extent to which the findings provide meaningful and applicable insight for practice. This provides a basis for considering the strengths and limitations of the study in greater detail.

3.5 Strengths and Limitations

A key strength of this study lies in its focus on early EBSA within primary school contexts. Much of the existing literature has focused on older children or more established patterns of non-attendance, often at the point where intervention becomes reactive rather than preventative. By foregrounding early indicators, this study contributes to a developing area of research, offering insight into how EBSA may emerge and be recognised before difficulties become more entrenched. In doing so, it supports a shift towards earlier and more preventative understandings of attendance difficulties.

The use of qualitative methods enabled an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, capturing the emotional, relational and contextual aspects of EBSA that may not be accessible through quantitative approaches. This was particularly important given the subtle and fluctuating nature of early indicators, which were often described as difficult to articulate or recognise. The richness of the data supported the identification of patterns across accounts, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of EBSA as an evolving and context-dependent process. This depth of insight aligns with the study's epistemological positioning, supporting attention to meaning, experience and context rather than relying on measurement alone.

A further strength is the inclusion of both parent and school staff perspectives. This reflects the ecological framework underpinning the study, recognising that EBSA is experienced across interacting systems rather than within a single context. In particular, the focus on family-school perspectives enables exploration of the mesosystem, where interactions between these settings shape children's experiences. Including these perspectives enabled exploration of both shared understandings and areas of divergence, contributing to a more holistic account of how early EBSA is recognised and responded to. It also allowed for consideration of how communication and alignment between family and school may shape children's experiences, reinforcing the relational nature of attendance.

The use of both individual and focus group interviews further strengthened the study. Individual interviews supported the exploration of personal and context-specific experiences, while focus groups enabled the examination of shared professional understandings and system-level processes. This combination supported both depth and interaction within the data, contributing to a more comprehensive and layered analysis of EBSA.

In addition, the study maintains strong relevance to practice. The findings informed the development of the SENSE framework, which offers a structured yet flexible approach to recognising and responding to early EBSA. This strengthens the applied contribution of the research, supporting its usefulness within educational psychology practice and wider school systems. The study therefore extends beyond description, offering a practice-informed conceptualisation of early EBSA that is directly applicable within educational psychology and school contexts.

However, several limitations must be acknowledged. The small and localised sample limits the transferability of the findings. All participating schools were drawn from a single locality and were already engaged with attendance-related issues. This may mean that the practices described reflect more proactive or relationally attuned contexts than might be evident more widely. As such, the findings should be understood as contextually situated, offering insight rather than generalisable conclusions.

Recruitment through schools also introduces potential bias. As gatekeepers, schools may have influenced which participants were invited or felt able to

participate. It is possible that those who engaged were more confident, reflective or positively engaged with school systems, which may shape the nature of the accounts provided. Parents with more positive relationships with schools may have been more likely to feel comfortable engaging in research situated within the school context and may therefore be well represented within the sample.

At the same time, parents with more challenging or adversarial relationships may also have been motivated to participate in order to share their experiences, potentially leading to these perspectives being more prominent within the data. In addition, some parent participants held dual roles as school staff, which may have influenced their understanding of school systems and how they interpreted and articulated their experiences.

As a result, the sample may reflect particular perspectives shaped by both relational experiences with schools and familiarity with school systems and may not fully capture the breadth of experiences across families.

The reliance on adult perspectives represents a further limitation. While the inclusion of parents and school staff provides valuable insight into how EBSA is recognised and understood, the absence of direct child voice means that findings are based on adult interpretations of children's experiences. Although this decision was made in order to avoid potential distress and to focus on early, less easily articulated experiences, it inevitably constrains the extent to which children's perspectives are directly represented.

Although SEND, particularly autism, are recognised in practice and research to be associated with EBSA (Adams, 2022; Totsika et al., 2024) SEND did not emerge as a discrete theme within this study. This was not an oversight but rather reflects the way in which participants described children's experiences. Across the dataset, difficulties were more often understood in terms of unmet need, encompassing a broad range of emotional, relational and contextual factors rather than being framed through diagnostic categories.

While some children discussed may have met criteria for SEND, participants tended to focus on how needs were recognised and responded to within everyday practice, rather than on formal identification. In this way, the theme of unmet need captures a wider cross-section of children, including those with identified SEND as

well as those whose needs may be less visible or not formally diagnosed. This contrasts with a tendency within the literature to foreground diagnostic groupings, particularly autism, as a primary explanatory factor in EBSA.

Instead, the findings suggest that the mechanisms underpinning EBSA, such as difficulties with emotional regulation, sensory sensitivities, relational safety and environmental demands; may be experienced across a broader population of children, regardless of formal diagnosis. This aligns with the study's ecological and relational framing of EBSA, where difficulties are understood as arising through interactions between the child and their environment, rather than residing solely within the child.

There are also limitations associated with the data collection methods. The use of both online and in-person interviews may have introduced variability in the data, particularly in relation to rapport and communication. Online interviews may limit access to non-verbal cues, while focus group dynamics may influence participation, with some voices shaping the direction of discussion more strongly than others. Participants may also moderate their responses in group settings, particularly where discussions relate to shared practice or organisational contexts.

In addition, the evolving design of the study, while responsive and appropriate to the research context, introduced limitations in relation to methodological consistency. The reduced role of the survey limited opportunities for triangulation across methods, and the shift towards a qualitatively led design means that findings are based primarily on interpretative analysis. While this aligns with the study's epistemological positioning, it also underscores that the findings represent one possible, contextually situated interpretation rather than an objective account. More broadly, the study reflects wider challenges within the field of EBSA, where conceptual ambiguity and variability in terminology continue to shape both research and practice.

Finally, it is important to consider the influence of the researcher's positioning. As discussed in the reflexivity section, prior professional experience may have shaped the interpretation of the data, particularly in relation to the emphasis on relational and systemic factors. While reflexive practices were used to critically

examine this influence, it is not possible to fully separate the researcher's perspective from the analytic process.

Overall, the strengths of the study lie in its depth, relevance and contribution to an under-researched area, while its limitations relate primarily to issues of scope, representation and methodological constraint. These limitations do not undermine the value of the findings but instead frame the conditions under which they should be interpreted. They also highlight important directions for future research, including broader sampling, inclusion of child voice and exploration of EBSA across a wider range of educational contexts. Reflecting on these strengths and limitations also highlights the key areas of learning that have emerged through the research process.

3.6 Researcher Learning and Development

This research process has contributed significantly to my professional development as a TEP, shaping both my understanding of EBSA and my approach to working with children, families and school systems. Through engaging with participants' experiences and the analytic process, I have developed a more nuanced and relational understanding of attendance difficulties, moving beyond behavioural interpretations towards a more ecological and systemic perspective.

A key area of learning relates to the recognition of early indicators of EBSA. Prior to conducting this research, I believed I had a relatively well-developed understanding of what early EBSA might look like, particularly within primary school contexts. However, within the initial interviews, it became clear that focusing on primary schools alone did not fully capture the early development of these patterns, and that experiences associated with EBSA may begin much earlier in children's developmental trajectories.

This study has therefore extended my understanding, highlighting how EBSA may emerge through subtle, fluctuating and often ambiguous signs of distress, including somatic complaints, anticipatory anxiety and context-dependent variations in presentation. This has emphasised the importance of attending to patterns over time, rather than isolated incidents, and has strengthened my understanding of the

need for early, preventative approaches within practice. This resonates with my preference for early intervention.

This has direct implications for my future work as an EP. While I was already aware of the limitations of relying on attendance data or thresholds of absence, this research has strengthened my confidence in supporting schools to look beyond these measures. It has encouraged a greater focus on relational and emotional indicators of engagement, alongside a broader consideration of the contextual factors shaping children's experiences. In practice, this means working with schools to move beyond a narrow focus on attendance figures, supporting them to reflect more widely on the factors influencing children's ability to engage.

Alongside this, my understanding of the central role of relationships within EBSA has deepened. While I had previously recognised the importance of relationships within educational settings, this research has led me to view relational safety not as an additional support, but as a foundational condition for engagement. Trust, familiarity and emotional attunement are not peripheral; they shape whether school feels manageable or overwhelming for a child.

This has prompted me to reflect more critically on how relational practices are understood and valued within school systems. In my previous professional experience, much of this work was implicit - staff 'just knew' how to read a child's mood or adapt their approach in the moment. Through this research, I have come to recognise these everyday interactions, including small, consistent 'micro-relational' practices, as central to supporting children's sense of safety and belonging. This has strengthened my confidence in articulating and advocating for relational approaches within professional contexts, particularly where practice may otherwise become overly procedural or behaviour-focused.

At the same time, I have become more aware of the broader systemic context within which schools are operating. Participants described how reductions in wider support systems, such as the closure of Sure Start centres and limited access to community-based services, have resulted in schools increasingly supporting families beyond the traditional boundaries of education. This has expanded my understanding of the school's role within the wider system, and the extent to which schools are often responding to needs that extend beyond the classroom.

Linked to this, the concept of school readiness was frequently raised. Participants described how children who enter school without certain social, emotional or developmental foundations may begin their school experience 'on the back foot,' with difficulties potentially compounding over time. This has highlighted how early experiences can shape trajectories of anxiety and engagement, reinforcing the importance of support that extend beyond the school gates.

A further area of learning relates to the role of school systems in shaping children's experiences of attendance. The findings highlight how flexibility and responsiveness within primary school contexts can act as protective factors, enabling children to engage despite experiencing anxiety. In contrast, increased structural demands and reduced flexibility, particularly during transition points, may contribute to increased vulnerability. This has strengthened my focus on understanding how systems function when working with schools, rather than perceiving difficulty as being located solely within the child.

As an emerging EP, this reinforces my commitment to working at a systemic level, supporting schools to reflect on how policies, routines and expectations may shape children's experiences. It also highlights the importance of maintaining continuity across transitions, ensuring that relational and adaptive practices are sustained rather than lost.

The study has also deepened my understanding of the role of families within EBSA. Parents' accounts highlighted the significant emotional and practical impact of attendance difficulties, alongside the importance of parental co-regulation and family-school relationships. This has reinforced the need to engage with families as active partners in understanding and responding to EBSA, recognising their role not as secondary to school-based intervention, but as central to the child's experience.

In addition, the research process has contributed to my development as a researcher. Engaging with RTA has strengthened my ability to move beyond description towards interpretation, recognising patterns within the data while remaining grounded in participants' accounts. The iterative nature of the analytic process highlighted the importance of flexibility, critical reflection and ongoing engagement with the data.

I have also developed a greater awareness of the role of the researcher in shaping the research process. As explored within the reflexivity section, my prior experience and professional positioning influenced how I engaged with the data and interpreted participants' accounts. This has reinforced the importance of reflexivity as an ongoing process.

The development of the SENSE framework represents a key outcome of this learning. The framework brings together the relational, emotional and systemic dimensions identified within the findings, providing a structured approach to recognising and responding to early EBSA. Through this process, I have developed skills in translating research findings into practice-relevant tools, which is a core aspect of the EP role.

At the same time, developing the framework highlighted the complexity of translating research into practice. It required balancing fidelity to the data with the need for clarity and usability and reinforced the importance of ensuring that frameworks remain flexible and responsive rather than prescriptive. This has deepened my understanding of the role of the EP not only as an interpreter of research, but as a facilitator of applied, context-sensitive practice. This is something that I have really admired in all of the EPs who I have had the privilege of working with during my training - there is a professional curiosity in always learning and being able to translate that into practice.

Overall, this research has contributed to a shift in my understanding of EBSA, from a focus on attendance as an outcome to a focus on engagement as a relational and contextual process. It has strengthened my ability to work systemically, to recognise early indicators of difficulty and to advocate for relational and flexible approaches within educational settings.

This learning will inform my future practice as an EP, supporting a more holistic and preventative approach to attendance difficulties. It also highlights the value of research as a tool for developing practice, enabling deeper understanding of complex issues and supporting more effective responses within real-world contexts. These reflections on learning inform the practical implications of the study, which are considered in the following section.

3.7 Implications for Practice and Future Research

The findings of this study have important implications for EP practice in the early identification and support of EBSA. Across the dataset, EBSA was consistently described as an emerging and relational process, shaped through interactions between emotional experience, relationships and environmental context. This has clear implications for how attendance difficulties are conceptualised, identified and responded to within educational systems.

A key implication for practice is the need to move beyond attendance as a purely quantitative measure. The findings show that children may be physically present in school while experiencing significant emotional distress or may demonstrate early indicators of difficulty before patterns of absence become evident. Reliance on attendance data alone may therefore obscure important early signs of vulnerability. EPs are increasingly involved in supporting schools to develop more nuanced approaches to monitoring engagement, incorporating emotional, relational and contextual indicators alongside attendance data.

This may involve supporting schools to recognise patterns of behaviour that signal emerging difficulty, such as anticipatory anxiety, somatic complaints or fluctuating presentation across contexts. These indicators are often subtle and context-dependent, requiring attention to patterns over time rather than isolated incidents. EPs can play a key role in developing shared understanding of these early signs, supporting staff to respond before difficulties become more entrenched.

A second implication relates to the central role of relationships in supporting engagement. The findings position relational safety as a core mechanism within EBSA, highlighting the importance of trust, familiarity and emotional attunement. This suggests that relational approaches are not an additional layer of support, but a foundation for effective practice.

For EPs, this involves working with schools systemically to prioritise relational approaches and to recognise the role of all adults within the school environment. Support staff and office staff were often described as playing a significant role in supporting children's emotional wellbeing, despite this not always being formally acknowledged. These everyday relational interactions, while often informal, appear to be central to enabling engagement.

Linked to this, the findings emphasise the importance of flexibility and responsiveness within school systems. Participants described how small, individualised adjustments such as flexible entry points, reduced expectations during periods of distress, or the provision of a specific role or routine, can significantly influence a child's ability to attend school. These 'micro-adjustments' are often embedded within everyday practice rather than formalised within policy yet appear to function as effective mechanisms of support.

This suggests that early intervention does not necessarily require intensive or specialist provision, but rather the capacity for systems to respond flexibly to emerging need. EPs can support this by facilitating reflective discussions with schools about how policies, routines and expectations may be adapted to better align with children's needs, particularly during periods of increased vulnerability.

The findings also identify transitions as key points of risk. Participants described how transitions, both within primary school and into secondary education, are associated with increased demands and reduced relational continuity. This positions transitions as important opportunities for early intervention, where support can be put in place to maintain continuity and reduce anxiety.

EPs are well positioned to support this work, for example by facilitating communication between settings and supporting transition planning that prioritises relational continuity. This may include identifying key adults, maintaining familiar routines where possible, and ensuring that information about the child's needs is meaningfully shared across contexts.

In addition, the findings highlight the importance of working in partnership with families. EBSA was consistently described as a shared family experience, with significant emotional and practical implications for parents. This corroborates the need to engage families as active partners in understanding and responding to attendance difficulties.

EPs can support this by supporting schools to reflect on and strengthen how communication between family and school is established and maintained, helping to develop a shared understanding of the child's experiences and needs. This may involve working with schools to strengthen their engagement with families, for example through consultation, staff development or the provision of accessible

information for parents via workshops or school-based resources. EPs may also support schools in developing approaches that help parents to understand and respond to anxiety, while recognising the wider emotional impact of EBSA on family systems.

The SENSE framework, developed through this study, offers a practical tool for supporting these approaches. By bringing together relational, emotional and systemic dimensions, it provides a structured yet flexible way of recognising and responding to early indicators. EPs can use this within consultation, formulation and intervention to support more holistic and contextually informed responses to EBSA.

In relation to future research, several areas warrant further exploration. There is a need for research that incorporates children's perspectives, using methods that are sensitive to emotional wellbeing. While this study focused on adult interpretations in order to access early and less easily articulated experiences, including child voice would provide valuable insight into how EBSA is experienced directly.

Further research across a wider range of educational contexts would also strengthen understanding. This study is situated within a specific locality and includes schools already engaged with attendance-related issues. Exploring EBSA in settings with varying levels of awareness, resources and approaches would provide a broader understanding of how these processes operate across contexts.

There is also scope for further development and evaluation of the SENSE framework. Future research could explore how the framework is applied in practice, including its impact on early identification and intervention. This would support its refinement and contribute to the development of evidence-informed approaches to EBSA.

Overall, the findings emphasise the importance of early, relational and system-informed approaches to attendance difficulties. They contribute to an understanding of EBSA as a dynamic and contextually situated process and highlight the need to move beyond reactive models of intervention towards approaches that recognise and respond to emerging need. For EPs, this reinforces the importance of working across systems, supporting both individual children and the environments in which they are situated.

3.8 Dissemination of Findings

The findings of this study have relevance for both research and practice within educational psychology and school contexts. Dissemination will therefore focus on reaching both academic and applied audiences.

At a local level, findings will be shared with participating schools and the wider educational psychology service through presentations and summary reports, supporting reflection on current practice and the development of early intervention approaches to EBSA. The SENSE framework provides a practical tool that may be used within consultation and training contexts, offering a structured way of recognising and responding to early indicators.

At a wider level, findings may be disseminated through conference presentations and publication within peer-reviewed journals, contributing to the growing body of literature on EBSA. This would support wider discussion around early identification, relational approaches and system-level responses to attendance difficulties.

Dissemination will also consider accessibility, ensuring that key findings are communicated in a way that is meaningful for practitioners and families, as well as for academic audiences.

3.9 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a critical reflection on the research process, considering how methodological decisions, researcher positioning and contextual factors shaped both the development of the study and the interpretation of findings. It has highlighted the strengths and limitations of the research, alongside the professional learning generated through engaging with the topic of EBSA.

The study contributes to an emerging understanding of EBSA as a relational and ecological process, rather than a discrete or individualised difficulty. By focusing on early indicators within primary school contexts, it offers insight into how attendance difficulties may develop over time and across systems. The findings highlight the importance of recognising subtle and context-dependent signs of distress, alongside the central role of relationships and system-level responsiveness

in supporting engagement. In doing so, the study contributes to a shift from attendance-focused models towards more relational and engagement-based understandings of EBSA.

The development of the SENSE framework represents a key outcome of the study, providing a structured yet flexible approach to understanding and responding to early EBSA within practice. While the framework is grounded in the findings, it remains interpretative and would benefit from further exploration and application across a range of contexts.

Overall, the research reinforces the importance of early, relational and system-informed approaches to attendance difficulties. It highlights the role of EPs in supporting schools and families to recognise and respond to emerging need, and underscores the value of preventative, contextually grounded practice in addressing EBSA.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Expanded Summaries of Studies Included in the Review

Citation	Country	Journal	Participant Group	Method	Study Aims	Key findings
(Boaler et al., 2024)	UK	Educational Psychology in Practice	Multi-agency RSG comprised nine core members who were employed in services across one urban local authority in England. They included an EP, specialist teachers for autism and medical needs, two members of the vulnerable children's team, a virtual school education practitioner, a representative from Special Educational Needs and Disability Information Advice and Support Services (SENDIASS), and a	Use of RADIO model. Content analysis of ongoing planning and review meetings, an evaluative focus group, and interview data.	Co-production of an early identification of needs tool (EINT) for identifying potential emotion-based attendance difficulties	Co-production of an early identification of needs tool (EINT) that practitioners could use across settings that was fit for purpose in the local context. The process and outcomes were positively evaluated by a range of stakeholders and the tool is in the process of being further disseminated within the LA and across services. Findings from this project are consistent with the wider literature that early identification is key to preventing and

first response worker
and Young Minds
charity
representative.

reducing the number
of students with
anxiety related
to EBSNA particularly
when supported by
collaborative and
multi-tiered
approaches
Additionally, early
identification systems
and tools are likely to
be most effective
when families are not
at a crisis point; as
over
time what may have
started as one need,
for example, medical,
if not monitored, often
leads to further
difficulties.

(Chian et al., 2024)	UK	Educational and Child Psychology	School staff: Six mainstream school staff (five female, one male) from different primary and secondary schools, all with at least one year's experience supporting pupils experiencing EBSA. Pupils: Seven school-aged pupils (five male, two female) with histories of persistent non-attendance linked to anxiety/emotional difficulties; six had a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Condition. Some pupils were attending mainstream schools, while others were temporarily placed in alternative provision.	Design: Qualitative, interpretivist approach focusing on lived experiences. Data collection: Semi-structured interviews with staff (online) and pupils (in person), supported by visual and creative materials for pupils. Analysis: • School staff interviews analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA). • Pupil interviews analysed using Interpretat	• To explore facilitators and barriers to effective EBSA practices in mainstream schools. • To capture and integrate both school staff and pupil perspectives on EBSA provision and school experiences. • To inform inclusive, whole-school approaches to supporting pupils experiencing EBSA.	School staff perspectives: EBSA practices are hindered by systemic barriers, including limited funding and staffing, challenges in multi-agency working, and difficulties engaging some families. Pupil perspectives: Positive school experiences are facilitated by a strong sense of inclusivity, including caring relationships with staff, positive peer relationships, and opportunities to build on pupils' interests, strengths, and achievements. Overall: Inclusive school climates and positive relationships may act as protective factors for school attendance, while systemic constraints
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				ive Phenome nological Analysis (IPA). Sampling: Purposive and snowball sampling; multi- informant design to enable triangulation.		threaten effective EBSA support.
(Chu et al., 2019)	US	Cognitive and Behavioral Practice	Part 1: administrators Part 2: Multidisciplinary - researchers and school-based administrators and counsellors	Two-part study. 1: Estimating the scope of the problem 2: Developing an early identification tracker Part 1: survey Part 2: multidisciplinary group meetings	The development of an online early detection tracking system for school absenteeism	Found there were common predictors of absenteeism (student/family variables including age, sibling history, Special Educational Needs).

(Cunningham et al., 2022)	UK	Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties	Eight members of primary school staff, who had experience supporting children with difficulty regularly attending school, from both mainstream and special primary schools in England.	Eight semi-structured interviews analysed with Thematic Analysis	Understanding the perceptions and experiences of primary school staff in order to determine how best to support children struggling to attend school at the earlier stages of their education.	Parental collaboration and support were key to effecting change Early intervention is important
(Ingul et al., 2019)	Norway	Cognitive and Behavioral Practice	Various	Meta-analysis of existing community-based studies of youth who show early signs of SR	Identifying Signs and Risk Factors for Emerging School Refusal. Reviewed signs and likely risk factors for emerging SR and presented a school-based framework for their efficient identification.	Identifying Early Signs: • Absence or Partial Absence • Anxiety and Depression • Somatic Complaints • Risk Factors identified: • Age and Transitions • Problematic Emotion Regulation

-
- Negative Thinking, Low Self-Efficacy, and Limited Problem Solving
 - Problematic Student-Teacher Relationship and Unpredictability at School
 - Bullying, Social Isolation, and Loneliness
 - Educational Difficulties
 - Limited Cooperation Between School and Home
 - Parental Psychopathology
 - Parental Overprotection
 - Unhealthy Family Functioning
-

Targeted intervention for those identified as at-risk or showing emerging SR can ward off the more serious and sometimes treatment-resistant problem of established SR.

Appendix B: Summary of Data Collection Methods

Method	Participants	Mode of Delivery	Data Collected	Recording & Transcription	Purpose in Study
Parent Survey	Parents/carers of primary-aged children	Online (distributed via schools)	Demographic data and Likert-scale responses based on Trafford framework and EBSA Horizons risk/resilience factors	Automatically captured via survey platform	To provide structured insight into parental perspectives on early EBSA indicators and contributing factors
Semi-Structured Interviews	Parents and school staff	In person or online (Microsoft Teams), depending on participant preference	Verbal accounts of experiences, perceptions and responses to EBSA	Online: recorded and transcribed via Microsoft Teams In person: audio recorded and transcribed using Microsoft Word	To explore lived experiences, relational dynamics and contextual influences in depth
Focus Groups	School staff	In person (school setting)	Group discussions exploring shared experiences and practices	Audio recorded and transcribed verbatim using Microsoft Word	To explore collective understandings, school-based practices and systemic influences

Method	Participants	Mode of Delivery	Data Collected	Recording & Transcription	Purpose in Study
Reflexive Field Notes	Researcher	Ongoing throughout data collection	Observations, reflections, emerging ideas	Written notes maintained by researcher	To support reflexivity and inform ongoing analysis

Appendix C: Participant Recruitment Posters

Charis Gates
Trainee Educational Psychologist





University of East Anglia

Thesis research: An exploration of early perceptions of Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) as experienced by parents and school staff.

I am looking for participants to share their experiences through a **short confidential survey**. Your input can help understanding of how children in this age group experience school worries and will help shape future support and interventions for students facing similar challenges.

You will also be invited to take part in a longer interview if you choose to.

Approx 15 minutes



Who can participate?
Parents or guardians of children of primary school age. You can complete the survey **whether or not you have concerns about your child's attendance**.

Why participate?

- ✦ Your voice matters—help improve understanding and support systems
- ✦ Completely anonymous & confidential
- ✦ Quick & easy survey participation



Survey link: <https://forms.office.com/e/hcC1FwMsN8>
Project lead: Charis Gates Charis.Gates@uea.ac.uk

Ethical approval awarded by UEA EDU S-REC (ETH2425-1439)

Appendix D: Parent Survey with Embedded Participant Information Sheet

Primary school-aged children's worries around attending school

* Required

Participant Information and consent

- 1. What is this study about?** You are invited to take part in a research study about children who experience worries or concerns around attending school. The research will focus on how parents and school staff notice school avoidance in primary school aged children. You have been invited to participate in this study because you are the parent or carer of a child who is of primary school age. **You are invited to complete the survey whether or not you feel that your child currently shows avoidance of school.**

If you do feel that your child shows avoidance of school, at the end of the survey, you will be asked if you would like to take part in an interview to discuss your experiences, but this is completely voluntary and you are under no obligation to take part in the second phase of the study if you complete the questionnaire. This Participant Information tells you about the research study. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to take part in the study. Please read this sheet carefully and ask questions about anything that you don't understand or want to know more about.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. By giving consent to take part in this study you are telling us that you:

- Understand what you have read.
- Agree to take part in the research study as outlined below.
- Agree to the use of your personal information as described.

You can access a copy of this Participant Information Sheet to keep here: https://ueanorwich-my.sharepoint.com/:b:/g/personal/qwv22dru_uea_ac_uk/EZOn8IJ-fidOldGPWeYStyEBkVIHWYsnStV5pL6MPpblg?e=k2HdJH

☐ Continue

2. **Who is running the study?** The study is being carried out by the following researcher: Mrs Charis Gates. Postgraduate Researcher, Doctorate of Educational Psychology, School of Education and Lifelong Learning, University of East Anglia (Charis.Gates@uea.ac.uk). This will take place under the supervision of Associate Professor, Dr Kimberley Bartholomew (K.Bartholomew@uea.ac.uk).

What will the study involve for me? The survey will take around 15 minutes of your time. You will be able to complete it from your own device. The anonymous survey will ask if you have any concerns about your child's feelings around attending school. There will be a series of questions which cover possible 'risk' or 'resilience' factors which children may experience. You will be asked to choose from one of five options from 'never' to 'always' to rate your perceptions of your own child's experience.

How much of my time will the study take? The survey will take around 15 minutes to complete.

Do I have to be in the study? Can I withdraw from the study once I have started? Being in this study is completely voluntary and you do not have to take part. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia (or [REDACTED] County Council) now or in the future.

If you decide to take part in the study, you can withdraw your consent up until your responses have been submitted. You can do this by not proceeding with the survey and closing the browser window.

What are the consequences if I withdraw from the study? If you decide to take part in the study and then change your mind, you are free to withdraw at any time before you have submitted the questionnaire. Once you have submitted it, your responses cannot be withdrawn because they are anonymous and therefore we will not be able to tell which one is yours.

Are there any risks or costs associated with being in the study? Aside from giving up your time, we do not, we do not expect that there will be any risks or costs associated with taking part in this study. However talking about children's worries can be emotional for parents, carers and school staff. If participating in the study raises any concerns or negative emotions, you will be able to access helpful support materials from the Psychology and Therapeutic Service which will be shared at the end of this survey.

Are there any benefits associated with being in the study? Participating in this study offers valuable benefits. Your contribution will help improve understanding of school-related anxiety and its impact on young children. Additionally, your contribution will give insights into the factors that contribute to school avoidance ultimately fostering a more positive school experience.

What will happen to information provided by me and data collected during the study? Your data will remain anonymous and will be collated to give an overall picture of trends in this age group.

Your personal data and information will only be used as outlined in this Participant Information Sheet, unless you consent otherwise. Data management will follow the Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA 2018) and UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR), and the University of East Anglia's Research Data Management Policy.

☐ Continue

3. The information you provide will be stored securely and your identity will be kept strictly confidential, except as required by law. Study findings will be published in a publicly available thesis and may also be used for other scholarly and educational purposes such as journal publication, conferences or teaching, but you will not be identified if you decide to participate in this study. The data will be kept for at least 10 years beyond the last date the data were used.

What if I would like further information about the study? When you have read this information, Mrs Charis Gates (Charis.Gates@uea.ac.uk) will be available via email to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have.

Will I be told the results of the study? You have a right to receive feedback about the overall results of this study. You can receive feedback from reading the summary sheet. This feedback will be in the form of a one page summary which will be sent to the school for distribution in the autumn term 2026.

What if I have a complaint or any concerns about the study? If there is a problem please let me know. You can contact me via the University of East Anglia at the following address: Mrs Charis Gates, School of Education and Lifelong Learning, University of East Anglia, NORWICH NR4 7TJ Charis.Gates@uea.ac.uk

If you are concerned about the way this study is being conducted please contact my supervisor, Dr Kimberley Bartholomew (K.Bartholomew@uea.ac.uk) or if you wish to make a complaint to someone independent from the study, please contact the Head of School of Education and Lifelong Learning: Professor Yann Lebeau (Y.Lebeau@uea.ac.uk).

How do I know that this study has been approved to take place? To protect your safety, rights, wellbeing and dignity, all research in the University of East Anglia is reviewed by a Research Ethics Body. This research was approved by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee).

What is the general data protection information I need to be informed about? According to data protection legislation, we are required to inform you that the legal basis for processing your data as listed in Article 6(1) of the UK GDPR is because this allows us to process personal data when it is necessary to perform our public tasks as a University.

In addition to the specific information provided above about why your personal data is required and how it will be used, there is also some general information which needs to be provided for you:

- The data controller is the University of East Anglia.
- For further information, you can contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@uea.ac.uk
- You can also find out more about your data protection rights at the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO).
- If you are unhappy with how your personal data has been used, please contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@uea.ac.uk in the first instance.

OK, I want to take part – what do I do next? If you are happy and consent to take part in the study simply indicate your consent in the next question and continue with the questions. By submitting your responses you are agreeing to the researcher using the data collected for the purposes described above.

Further information This information was last updated on 11th July 2025.

☐ Continue

4. Have you read the participant information sheet and consent to continue with the survey? *

☐ Yes

☐ No

You and your child

If you have more than one primary school aged child, please answer the questions for only one of them. You can repeat the form if you would like to submit answers for another child.
These questions will not identify you or your child.

5. Is your child...?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Prefer not to say

6. Are you the child's...?

- ☐ Mother
- ☐ Father
- ☐ Other

7. What is the name of the school that your child attends?

8. Which year group is your child in?

- ☐ Reception
- ☐ Year 1
- ☐ Year 2
- ☐ Year 3
- ☐ Year 4
- ☐ Year 5
- ☐ Year 6

9. What is your child's age?

- ☐ 4 years
- ☐ 5 years
- ☐ 6 years
- ☐ 7 years
- ☐ 8 years
- ☐ 9 years
- ☐ 10 years
- ☐ 11 years

10. Do you consider your child to have a special educational need? This does not need to be a formal diagnosis.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Maybe

This survey will ask you questions about your child's feelings towards school as well as some more general questions about their home life and feelings. Please select the option that most suits your child for each description.

11. Are you currently concerned about your child's anxiety about school?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Maybe

12. My child....

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Feels that 'no one understands them'	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Feels pressure from others to attend school / rushed to return	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Appears anxious, on edge, or worried for most of the day	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Seeks a lot of reassurance, especially about upcoming events	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Appears low / shows a lack of positive emotion	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Struggles to do simple tasks they were previously capable of	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Worries what others think of them	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Is shy, self-conscious and/or easily embarrassed	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Lacks confidence in their abilities to achieve well at school	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Is fearful of making mistakes in class / avoids work activities	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Persistently talks about negative aspects of school	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Never says anything good / positive about school	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
When feeling anxious / frustrated, feels this way for a long time	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Gets stuck in negative thought patterns / continues to talk about the same thing	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Has limited shared interests with peers	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Does not attend clubs with peers (inside or outside of school)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Feels a sense of loss (e.g. due to bereavement, parental separation / divorce)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Feels unstable with their home / school life	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Is not always certain which house they are staying at each night	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Does not know who will be at home	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

13. My child...

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Worries about their parents / carers when away from them	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Thinks that something bad might happen to their family	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Has a need to be around parents / carers to feel calm	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Stays home to spend time with family members/significant others	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Feels jealous of their brother / sister	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Often fights / argues with their brother / sister	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Does not feel comfortable leaving the house	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Only feels calm when at home	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Stays home so they can spend all day on devices/entertainment/media	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Finds it hard to come off technology, even for short periods of time	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Is viewed as an 'anxious' child by others	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Is not encouraged to do anything which may lead to any anxiety	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Has lost a connection to a teacher or friend	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Lacks confidence being in current classroom/s	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Is behind age-related expectations within areas of their learning	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Struggles to keep pace with the set work in class	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Dislikes going out of class for additional support	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Often feels frustrated by learning tasks	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Often falls out with / is bullied by peers	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Lacks close friendships in school	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

14. My child...

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Dislikes particular teachers / staff in school	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Struggles to talk with teachers / staff when has a difficulty	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Is anxious / fearful over particular parts of the school day (e.g. break time, specific lessons)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Struggles during transition points in school (e.g. arriving, lesson change over)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Feels overwhelmed by the noise / busyness in the classroom	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Does not have a place in school where they feel safe	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Feels that they will get into trouble for not attending school	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Thinks their teachers think badly of them / judge them for not attending school	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

15. My child...

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Feels that their parents / carers understand what they're going through	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Feels that their teachers / school staff understand what they're going through	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Is motivated to attend school when feeling able to	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Would like to be in school full-time in the future	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Wants to make progress with their learning	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Knows what they want to achieve in the future	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Feels there is something that they are good at	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Has things they can do which they are proud of	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Feels that everything will be alright in the future	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Can recognise and talk about good things that happen in the day	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Has a close friendship in school	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Feels liked by their peers in school	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Feels confident in themselves	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Feels that they are well liked by others	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Is able to talk with others about how they feel	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Is able to successfully calm themselves when feeling anxious	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Has a close relationship with family at home	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Feels able to open up and talk with family at home	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Feels safe and secure when at home	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Has a stable and predictable home routine	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

16. My child...

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Is able to separate from parents / carers	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Feels comfortable being away from parents / carers	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Has family who are motivated to support them to attend school	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Has family who value education and want them to do well with learning	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Has family who talk positively about school	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Is supported through good communication between home and school	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Has siblings who consistently attend school	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Has siblings who have not experienced Emotionally Based School Avoidance in the past	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Does things outside of school which they enjoy	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Belongs to clubs / attends activities outside of school	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Has a clear daily routine when not at school (e.g. sleep, activities, meals)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Is supported to engage in learning (formal or informal) when not at school	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Has a 'safe space' in school they can go to if feeling anxious	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Feels that school is a safe and predictable place to be	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Gets on well with most teachers	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Feels supported by teachers / staff in school	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Feels that teachers / staff care about them	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Feels a sense of belonging / identity within their class or a club in school	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Feels a sense of belonging / identity within their friendship group in school	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Has a particular strength in something they feel good at in school	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

17. My child...

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Is able to do something they are confident to show to their class	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Feels able and confident to ask for help in school	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Enjoys receiving additional support (e.g. 1:1 or small group) in school	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Has parts of school that they really enjoy or are interested in	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Has activities or aspects of school they look forward to	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Feels that teachers / school staff take time to try and understand them	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Is listened to and their views are included in any plans or support	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Thank you for completing this survey

18. Would you be willing to take part in an interview to discuss your child's worries or concerns about school attendance?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Thank you for your interest in taking part in an interview

Please **follow this link** <https://forms.office.com/e/5ypDjtx4Au> and enter your contact details **before** clicking submit on this form.

Please note that the responses to this survey will remain anonymous as the information that you have provided will not be linked.

Thank you for your interest and time.

If you would like further support with your child's worries, please see Suffolk Psychology and Therapeutic Services resources <https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/children-families-and-learning/wellbeing-in-education/ebsa-emotionally-based-school-avoidance/ebsa-resources-for-children-and-families>

Appendix E: Copy of Guide Questions

Sample questions for the parent

- Can you tell me a little about your child and their experiences of school so far?
- Thinking back, when did you first notice that school was becoming difficult for your child?
- What were the earliest signs that something wasn't quite right?
- How does your child show that school feels difficult?
- Are there particular parts of the school day or environment that your child finds easier or harder? (Prompt: mornings, evenings, weekends, after holidays)
- What do you think makes school feel difficult for them?
- How do relationships in school seem to affect how your child feels about going?
- What is it like at home when your child is finding school difficult?
- How has this affected you or your family?
- What have you found helpful in supporting your child?
- Have there been any small changes that have made a difference?
- How has communication with school been for you?
- What has felt supportive or unhelpful?
- What do you think would make things easier for your child?
- What support would be most helpful for your family?

Sample questions for school staff (SENDCo/teacher/pastoral)

- What are the first signs you notice when a child is beginning to find school difficult?
- Are there early indicators that might be easily missed?
- How do you understand why some children find it difficult to attend school?
- What do you think is happening for them?
- What role do relationships play in supporting children who are struggling to attend?
- Can you describe what helps a child feel safe or settled in school?
- What kinds of adaptations or strategies do you use to support these children?
- Are there small changes that seem to make a difference?
- How early do you feel schools are able to respond when difficulties first emerge?
- What helps or prevents early support?
- How do you work with families when a child is finding school difficult?
- What has been most effective in maintaining engagement?
- Do you feel like EBSA is getting worse or better in schools?
- What challenges do schools face in supporting children with EBSA?
- How do systems such as attendance policy or external services impact your work?
- If you could change one thing about how schools or systems respond to EBSA, what would it be?

Appendix F: Samples of Reflexive Field Notes

Early indicators

Need to capture how subtle the early signs are. Not 'refusal' in an obvious sense - more things like tummy aches, taking longer to get ready, saying 'I can't go' but not really being able to explain why.

Feels important not to impose a more obvious EBSA narrative onto this. Reinforces the importance of parental input as likely to see signs before school and perhaps before child makes the connection.

Also noticing how often adults describe needing to work it out for the child - they don't have the language/ emotional literacy to explain what's going on.

Maybe I've been expecting too much clarity here - actually confusion seems quite central.

My lens / EP influence

I keep coming back to relationships. Safe adults, who they go to, who gets them through the door. I'm aware this is probably influenced by my EP training and how Bronfenbrenner influences a lot of the content of the course. I'm quite primed to notice relational factors. But at the same time, it is in the data - parents and staff both talking about one key adult making the difference. Need to hold that balance - noticing it without over-prioritising it just because it fits with my professional lens.

Reaction to parent accounts

Parent transcripts felt quite heavy today. The Sunday night anxiety in particular stuck with me. It's made me think more about how much of this sits outside of school. I think I've been quite school-focused up to now, but for families it's

ongoing. I'm aware of this from working with CYP with more entrenched EBSA but the impact on families is huge even from early on. I don't have personal experience of EBSA but even the difficulty of separation anxiety at the nursery door has had me go to work in tears lots of times so it is that x100 for some of these parents.

Parents talk a lot about knowing whether they are doing the right thing and that really resonates. They want to support the school approach but their priority has to always be their child. Also noticed feeling quite frustrated on behalf of parents, especially around attendance data not reflecting effort and receiving a late mark outside the ten-minute registration window. Need to keep that in check a bit - don't want to slip into advocating rather than analysing.

Attendance vs experience

There feels like quite a strong tension between attendance as a number and attendance as an experience. Children can be 'in school' but really distressed, or arriving late but after a huge effort. Makes me question what counts as 'successful attendance.'

Probably something I need to be more explicit about - otherwise I risk reinforcing the same attendance-focused thinking that's being questioned. I was really struck by witnessing a child having difficulty attending in school A. The SENCo sent them home and suggest they have a second breakfast and then try again. That felt like such a positive framing but I wonder how it is recorded in the attendance figures.

Patterns across participants

Across roles, there's quite a consistent picture:

- starts small
- very emotionally driven
- difficult for children to explain

That consistency feels important.

- Also noticing differences depending on role:
- SENCos - more systems / identification
- TAs -more day-to-day emotional support
- parents - routines, anxiety, home impact

Feels like the ecological perspective coming through quite strongly (even if it's not explicitly named). Need to bring that into my discussion.

Earlier than expected

Didn't expect how early some of this starts - even nursery/reception. I think I came in with more of a primary/secondary framing, but this is pushing it much earlier. Makes me rethink what I mean by 'early EBSA', might need reframing. I know young children have separation anxiety but it is the support for families that needs to start earlier- is this a legacy of austerity/ COVID-19? Fewer community services available than in the past.

Mornings as a key moment

Mornings keep coming up as a pressure point:

- difficulty getting ready
- distress at the door
- last-minute escalation

Feels like the issue might be less about school itself and more about the transition into school.

Possibly worth developing this more analytically.

Sample bias / 'good practice' schools

Because of how schools were recruited, there's quite a lot of positive practice in the data (flexibility, relationships, adjustments).

This isn't a neutral sample. Need to be mindful that this might under-represent challenges or gaps. At the same time, that was the intention - focus is on what seems to help.

Language and interpretation

Adults often describe children as not having the words to explain what's going on. That means a lot of interpretation is happening on their behalf. Links back to my epistemological position - these are constructed understandings, not direct access to children's experiences.

Important to keep this in mind during analysis.

Appendix G: Process of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022)

Qualitative data from the interviews and focus group were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), following the six-phase process described by Braun and Clarke (2022). Consistent with RTA, these phases were approached recursively rather than as a fixed linear sequence. Analysis involved movement between the dataset, codes, candidate themes and developing interpretations as the analysis progressed. The examples below illustrate this process and are not intended to provide an exhaustive record of all coding decisions.

Phase 1: Familiarising with the dataset

Familiarisation began during data collection and transcription and continued through repeated reading of the interview and focus group transcripts. Initial observations were recorded alongside reflexive notes, including recurring patterns, points of interest and areas requiring further consideration. Particular attention was given to how participants described the earliest indications of difficulty, changes over time, relationships between home and school, and responses that appeared to support continued engagement with school. Reflexive notes were used to consider how the researcher's professional experience and theoretical positioning might influence what was being noticed within the data (see Appendix F and Chapter 3, Section 3.2).

Phase 2: Coding

Coding was undertaken manually and systematically across the dataset. Initial coding was predominantly inductive, with codes generated across the dataset while maintaining attention to features of participants' accounts that contributed to understanding the research questions. Coding attended both to explicit descriptions and to more interpretative meanings within participants' accounts. Transcripts were revisited throughout this process, allowing codes to be refined, expanded or reconsidered as engagement with the dataset developed.

The integrated coded extract table below provides examples of the progression from participant extract to initial code and subsequently to subtheme. It is illustrative rather than exhaustive.

Integrated Coded Extract Table (Not exhaustive)

Theme 1: EBSA begins early and develops through subtle signs of distress

Participant	Extract	Initial Code	Subtheme
A2	'Tears on the playground... attachment to parents... anger'	Emotional distress at entry	Somatic expressions of distress
A2	'Physically stop themselves coming into the building... grabbing hold of caregivers'	Physical resistance to entry	Somatic expressions of distress
B2	'Starts with lateness... develops into not coming into school'	Gradual escalation pattern over time	Gradual escalation
B2	'Morning routine becomes... very stressful... huge area of anxiety'	Anxiety embedded in routines	Anticipatory anxiety across time
C2-C5	'He'll scream, run after mum... once he's in he's fine'	Separation distress at threshold	Somatic expressions of distress
C4	'He couldn't articulate why... just anxiety'	Unexplained distress	Fluctuating and inconsistent presentation

Theme 2: Attendance difficulty reflects unmet need and environmental factors

Participant	Extract	Initial Code	Subtheme
A2	'Current ones... have additional needs and diagnosis'	EBSA linked to SEND	Emotional and cognitive overload

Participant	Extract	Initial Code	Subtheme
A3	'Children coming in without basic skills... still in nappies'	Developmental readiness gap	Emotional and cognitive overload
A4	'All his brainpower is taken up socially'	Social-cognitive overload	Emotional and cognitive overload
A4	'Too loud, too busy... people sit too close'	Sensory overwhelm	Sensory differences
C2-C5	'Struggles with noise levels... triggered by classroom'	Environmental trigger	Sensory differences
C1	'Sensory issues around clothing... won't wear uniform'	Sensory-based avoidance	Sensory differences
B1	'They know maths is there first thing... avoid that'	Task-related avoidance	Emotional and cognitive overload
C1	'Separation of parents... anxiety about where they're staying'	Family context influencing attendance	Competing demands across systems

Theme 3: Relational safety is a core protective factor

Participant	Extract	Initial Code	Subtheme
A3	'I just have a conversation... distract them... they come in fine'	Co-regulation through interaction	Emotional co-regulation
A3	'Give him a job... sit with me until ready'	Relational scaffolding	Micro-relational practices

Participant	Extract	Initial Code	Subtheme
A4	'They need a softer approach... nurture'	Nurturing relational style	Emotional co-regulation
A4	'If parents are on board, you're more successful'	Relational alignment with families	Trust and familiarity
A5	'We know the children... we can help them in the mornings'	Knowing the child well	Trust and familiarity
P2	'Teacher comes down... trusted adult comes to get him'	Trusted adult as bridge	Trust and familiarity
B1	'Meet and greet... rapport... they want to come in'	Relationship building at entry	Micro-relational practices

Theme 4: Primary schools sustain attendance through flexible, relational adaptation

Participant	Extract	Initial Code	Subtheme
A3	'Come in through a different door... avoid the line'	Adapted entry route	Flexible entry and transitions
A3	'Special activities... Superman colouring'	Motivational adjustment	Micro-adjustments to reduce distress
A4	'Thrive breakfast... quieter... softer start'	Alternative morning provision	Flexible entry and transitions
A4	'Take away the rush... break instructions down'	Reducing cognitive load	Micro-adjustments
A5	'Thrive breakfast... stepping stone into class'	Gradual transition support	Flexible entry

Participant	Extract	Initial Code	Subtheme
B1	'Meet them at the gate... even off-site'	Extending school boundary	Flexible entry
B1	'First 10 minutes soft activities'	Soft start adaptation	Micro-adjustments
C2-C5	'Come in half an hour earlier'	Staggered start	Flexible entry
B2	'Soft start... not 100 miles an hour'	Whole-school adaptation	Early preventative mindset

Theme 5: Family experience is central to EBSA

Participant	Extract	Initial Code	Subtheme
A2	'Supporting the family... not just the child'	Family-centred approach	Emotional impact on parents
A4	'I live it at home... my child has EBSA'	Dual parent-professional perspective	Emotional impact on parents
A4	'Your instinct is to keep them home'	Parental conflict	Emotional impact
B2	'Morning routine stressful for families'	Family stress cycles	Emotional impact
B2	'Different parents respond differently'	Variation in parental response	Experiences of judgement
C1	'Parents keep them off for a sniffle'	Parental anxiety influencing attendance	Parental co-regulation

Participant	Extract	Initial Code	Subtheme
P2	'Attendance looks horrific... but they are here every day'	System misrepresentation of effort	Experiences of judgement
P2	'It's very hard... they clash in the morning'	Complex family routines	Emotional impact

Theme 6: Transition and systems can amplify risk

Participant	Extract	Initial Code	Subtheme
A5	'Primary manage it well... secondary it appears suddenly'	Hidden continuity across phases	Misalignment of systems
A4	'He fears coming in... doesn't know what adults will be like'	Uncertainty about relational safety	Increased structural demands
C1	'Secondary school... no trusted adult'	Loss of relational anchor	Increased structural demands
C1	'If no support... high likelihood to become school refuser'	Risk amplification at transition	Misalignment of systems
B1	'Previously children stayed until break... now earlier intervention works'	System adaptation reduces risk	Misalignment of systems
P2	'Secondary school... you need diagnosis'	Access barriers in system	Gaps in service provision

Phase 3: Generating initial themes

Following initial coding, related codes were considered together to explore broader patterns of shared meaning across the dataset. Codes were grouped and reorganised into provisional subthemes and candidate themes. This involved considering not simply how frequently an issue was discussed, but how groups of codes contributed to an interpretative understanding of early EBSA in relation to the research questions. For example, codes relating to physical complaints, non-verbal distress, anticipatory anxiety and gradual increases in attendance difficulty contributed to the developing interpretation that early EBSA may be subtle, fluctuating and progressive.

Phase 4: Developing and reviewing themes

Candidate themes and subthemes were reviewed against the coded extracts and the wider dataset. This involved considering whether each theme captured a coherent pattern of meaning, whether there was sufficient distinction between themes, and whether the developing thematic structure provided a meaningful account of participants' experiences. Some codes and subthemes were moved, combined or reconsidered during this process. Analysis therefore involved movement between individual extracts, codes, subthemes and the developing thematic structure rather than progressing through the phases only once.

The tables below illustrate how groups of codes were organised into subthemes and how interpretative commentary was used to consider the meaning represented within each developing theme.

Subthemes for Theme 1: EBSA begins early and develops through subtle signs of distress

Subtheme	Codes	Illustrative Extract	Interpretative Commentary
Somatic expressions of distress	Physical complaints, non-verbal distress, difficulty articulating feelings	'It's the bellyache. It's a headache. I don't want to go... and they can't say why.' (A1) 'I've hurt my leg... I've hurt my finger... there's always something.' (P2)	Early EBSA is often communicated through physical complaints rather than explicit verbal explanations, suggesting distress that is experienced somatically before it can be clearly articulated.
Anticipatory anxiety across time	Sunday anxiety, sleep disruption, dread of the school week	'Every Sunday night I know he's not going to sleep... because he knows it's Monday tomorrow.' (P1)	Distress is temporally distributed, showing that EBSA extends beyond school itself into anticipatory emotional cycles.
Fluctuating and inconsistent presentation	Good days and bad days, variability, unpredictability	'He'll scream, he'll run after her. He's a real handful getting into class. Once he's in class, he's been fine.' (C3)	Presentation varies across contexts, with children appearing settled in school despite significant distress beforehand. This inconsistency may contribute to early EBSA being interpreted as situational

Subtheme	Codes	Illustrative Extract	Interpretative Commentary
Gradual escalation over time	Increasing distress, pattern formation, slow progression	‘It’s just general lateness that creeps in and then that kind of develops into not being able to go to the classroom and then not coming into school.’ (B2)	rather than indicative of a developing pattern. Difficulties develop incrementally over time, with small changes accumulating into more significant barriers to attendance if not recognised early.

Subthemes for Theme 2: Attendance difficulty reflects unmet need and environmental factors.

Subtheme	Codes	Illustrative Extract	Interpretative Commentary
Emotional and cognitive overload	Overwhelm, 'can't cope', shutdown	'There are days where he literally cannot cope.' (P1) 'Something is hard.' (A1)	Attendance difficulty reflects a perceived inability to manage demands, rather than refusal.
Sensory differences	Noise sensitivity, clothing discomfort, environmental triggers	'If his socks feel wrong... that's it... We're back to the start.' (P2)	Sensory experiences can act as significant barriers to engagement, particularly within busy school environments.
Relationships and belonging	Belonging, trust, fear of adults/peers	'Having a good understanding teacher makes all the difference.' (P1)	Emotional safety within relationships is central to engagement with school.
Competing demands across systems	Family anxiety, separation, routines	'His anxiety really is coming away from mum... he'll scream, he'll run after her.' (C3)	Attendance reflects wider ecological influences, including family-school dynamics.

Subthemes for Theme 3: Relational safety is a core protective factor

Subtheme	Codes	Illustrative Extract	Interpretative Commentary
Emotional co-regulation	Reassurance, support at transitions, responsiveness	'She makes him laugh... she just sort of eases him in the door.' (P1)	Relationships support emotional regulation, enabling children to tolerate anxiety at key transition points.
Micro-relational practices	Noticing, remembering, small interactions	'You just pledge for the next 10 days... you spend 2 minutes with them... create emotional currency' (B1)	Small, repeated interactions build connection over time, contributing to a sense of belonging and engagement.
Trust and familiarity	Consistency, known adults, predictability	'Having a good understanding teacher makes all the difference.' (P1)	Familiar and consistent relationships reduce uncertainty and support children's capacity to engage.
Relational rupture and disconnection	Uncertainty, fear, perceived instability	'He fears coming in... doesn't know what adults will be like...' (A4)	Perceived relational instability increases anxiety and can disrupt engagement with school.

Subthemes for Theme 4: Primary schools sustain attendance through flexible, relational adaptation

Subtheme	Codes	Illustrative Extract	Interpretative Commentary
Flexible entry and transitions	Soft starts, alternative routines, gradual entry	'We just get them in however we can.' (A2)	Flexibility reduces emotional demand at key transition points, enabling engagement.
Micro-adjustments to reduce distress	Sensory adaptations, small practical changes	'We changed the socks... and Wednesdays were fine.' (P2)	Small, individualised adjustments can significantly alter emotional experience, demonstrating the importance of attuned support.
Informal relational support	Check-ins, conversations, emotional reassurance	'It's just checking in with them... seeing how they are that day.' (A2)	Support is embedded within everyday interactions, rather than delivered through formal interventions.
Early preventative mindset	Early identification, responsiveness to initial signs	'We want to know from the first day when school is hard.' (A1)	Proactive approaches enable early intervention, reducing the likelihood of escalation into persistent absence.

Subthemes for Theme 5: Family experience is central to EBSA

Subtheme	Codes	Illustrative Extract	Interpretative Commentary
Emotional impact on parents	Stress, exhaustion, emotional burden	'It's a whole other world of parenting.' (P1)	EBSA is experienced systemically, affecting parental wellbeing and family functioning.
Parental co-regulation	Parent emotional state influencing child	'If I'm calmer, he's calmer.' (P1)	Parent-child emotional dynamics are reciprocal, highlighting the relational nature of regulation.
Experiences of judgement and misunderstanding	Feeling misunderstood, pressure from systems	'If a child screamed here because they didn't want to go home, it'd be a safeguarding issue... but when they scream because they don't want to go in, parents are expected to trust the adults.' (A4)	Differences in how distress is interpreted across contexts may lead to misunderstanding, impacting relationships between family and school.

Subthemes for Theme 6: Transition and systems can amplify risk

Subtheme	Codes	Illustrative Extract	Interpretative Commentary
Increased structural demands and reduced flexibility	Increasing expectations, reduced adaptability, system rigidity	'They're expected to just get on with it... there's not that same flexibility.' (A2)	Increasing demands alongside reduced flexibility may exacerbate existing difficulties, particularly where adaptation was previously protective.
Misalignment of attendance systems	Attendance data vs lived experience	'They're in school every day... but the attendance looks horrific.' (P2)	Quantitative measures of attendance may not capture children's lived experiences of distress, leading to potential misinterpretation of engagement.
Gaps in service provision and systemic fragmentation	Threshold issues, unmet need, system boundaries	'If it doesn't fit into SEND... then it's kind of a little bit... lost.' (C1)	Children whose needs do not align with existing service thresholds may be overlooked within fragmented systems, increasing risk of unmet need.

Phase 5: Refining, defining and naming themes

Themes were further refined to clarify the central organising concept represented by each theme and its relationship to the overall account of early EBSA. Theme and subtheme names were reviewed to ensure that they communicated the interpretation being developed rather than functioning only as descriptive topic headings. The themes were therefore understood as analytic constructions developed through engagement with the dataset, rather than categories identified as pre-existing within the data. This process resulted in six final themes:

1. EBSA begins early and develops through subtle signs of distress
2. Attendance difficulty reflects unmet need and environmental factors
3. Relational safety is a core protective factor
4. Primary schools sustain attendance through flexible, relational adaptation
5. Family experience is central to EBSA
6. Transition and systems can amplify risk

The final thematic structure, including the subthemes associated with each theme, is presented in Appendix K.

Phase 6: Writing up

Writing formed part of the analytic process rather than occurring only after analysis had been completed. During the development of the Results and Discussion, themes were further articulated through the selection of illustrative extracts and consideration of how each theme contributed to answering the research questions. The written analysis brought participant accounts into dialogue with the study's ecological framework and existing literature, while maintaining reflexive awareness of the researcher's active role in interpretation. This process supported the development of the final thematic account presented in Chapter 2.

Appendix H: Approved Ethics Application for UEA

Ethics ETH2425-1439 : Mrs Charis Gates

Date Created	02 Feb 2025
Date Submitted	04 Mar 2025
Date of last resubmission	11 Jul 2025
Date forwarded to committee	15 Jul 2025
Researcher	Mrs Charis Gates
Category	PGR
Supervisor	Dr Kimberley Bartholomew
Faculty	Faculty of Social Sciences
Current status	Approved after amendments made

Ethics application

Applicant and research team

Principal Applicant

Name of Principal Applicant
Mrs Charis Gates
UEA account
qwv22dru@uea.ac.uk
School/Department
School of Education and Lifelong Learning
Category
PGR

Primary Supervisor

Name of Primary Supervisor

[Dr Kimberley Bartholomew](#)

Primary Supervisor's school/department
School of Education and Lifelong Learning

Project details

Project title

An exploration of early perceptions of Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) as experienced by parents and school staff.

Project start date

18 Jul 2025

Project end date

31 Aug 2026

Describe the scope and aims of the project in language understandable by a non-technical audience. Include any other relevant background which will allow the reviewers to contextualise the research.

Research Question 1 – what are the early indicators of Emotionally Based School Avoidance as perceived by school staff?

Research Question 2 – what are the early indicators of Emotionally Based School Avoidance as perceived by parents and carers?

This research aims to explore the early identification of Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) in primary school-aged children, with the goal of improving understanding of the early stages of the EBSA spectrum. Identifying EBSA at an earlier stage may help inform proactive strategies for intervention (Thambirajah et al., 2008).

The findings of this research could contribute to two key areas within the Local Authority (LA). Firstly, they could support the development of a bespoke and standardised early intervention framework, enhancing the EBSA resources available to schools. Currently, while extensive resources exist for EBSA, there is no dedicated early intervention offer tailored to primary settings (Gulliford & Miller, 2015).

Secondly, the research could provide a foundation for strengthening the transition charter between the primary and secondary schools within the academy trust. The systematic sharing of information regarding identified risk and resilience factors could improve the understanding of both whole cohorts and individual children. This would enable schools to take a proactive approach in identifying and addressing potential attendance concerns before they escalate into persistent school avoidance (Havik et al., 2015).

Provide a brief explanation of the research design (e.g. interview, experimental, observational, survey), questions, methodology, and data gathered/analysis. If relevant, include what the participants will be expected to do/experience.

This is a mixed methods research design. Phase one will be a 15 minute anonymous online survey via Microsoft Teams of parents which aims to collect quantitative data information on risk and resilience. The questions are based on the risk and resilience profiles developed by Jerrica Holder and EdPsychEd <https://www.edpsyched.co.uk/ebsa-horizons>. The results from this survey will be analysed using descriptive statistics. The survey will reach the parents of around 300 children and there is no upper limit to the number of responses although the researcher is aware that response rates may result in 30-50 responses.

The second phase of the research will be through interviews of up to ten parents which will ask about their perceptions of the early indicators of worries about school. Participants will be invited at the end of the online survey to click a link to a separate form where they can leave their contact details if they are willing to take part in semi-structured interviews. Interviews will take place either in person or online. Interview transcripts will be analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.

Up to ten school staff will also be interviewed using semi-structured interviews with analysis through reflexive thematic analysis.

Detail how any adverse events arising in the course of the project will be reported in a timely manner.

Adverse events will be discussed with research supervisor as soon as possible after they take place. If deemed necessary after supervision, adverse events will be reported to the chair of the EDU ethics committee via Ethics Monitor.

Severe adverse events will be reported to the HoS immediately.

Will you also be applying for Health Research Authority approval (HRA)?

No

Indicate if you are applying for approval for an experiment to be conducted in the School of Economics' Laboratory for Economic and Decision Research (LEDL).

No

Is the project?:

none of the options listed

Does the project have external funding administered through the University's Research and Innovation Services (RIS)?

No

Will the research take place outside of the UK?

No

Will any part of the project be carried out under the auspices of an external organisation, or involve collaboration between institutions?

No

Do you require or have you already gained approval from an ethics review body external to UEA?

Yes, approval to be obtained from inside the UK

Does this new project relate to a project which already has ethics approval from UEA?

No

Research categories

Will the project include primary data collection involving human participants?

Yes

Will the project use secondary data involving human participants?

No

Will the project involve the use of live animals?

No

Will the project have the potential to affect the environment?

No

Will the project have the potential to affect culturally valuable, significant or sensitive objects or practices?

No

Will the project involve security sensitive research?

No

Will the project involve a generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) tool?

No

Human participants - selection and recruitment

How many Participant Groups are there who will receive tailored participant information?:

Two

Name of Participant Group 1.

School staff

Name of Participant Group 2, if applicable.

Parents or carers

How will the participants be selected/recruited?

Purposive Sampling: There are several schools that have sought the EPS' input on supporting parents of primary school-aged children with EBSA. One that expresses interest in participating will be selected.

The Head Teacher of the selected school serves as the gatekeeper. The researcher will send an initial recruitment email to both the Head and SENCo. The Head must grant permission before recruitment proceeds.

Once permission is granted, the SENCo will receive the Participant Information Sheet (PIS) and recruitment details.

Recruitment materials for parents will consist of a flyer with a link and QR code to the survey. Flyers will be sent out electronically through the school's usual communication methods. Paper copies of the flyer will also be used, these will be displayed to parents in communication areas such as bulletin boards and classroom windows. The PIS will be the first section of the survey and participants will have to indicate their consent to proceed.

There is no limit to the number of participants completing the survey.

At the end of the survey, participants will be invited to take part in an interview. To do this, they will need to leave a contact email address. The researcher will then send the second PIS and consent form in order to proceed. Parent interviews will be capped at 10 participants.

An invitation email with an attached PIS will be distributed to staff by the SENCo. Staff will be asked to contact the researcher if they would be willing to take part in interviews. The researcher will then

send consent forms and arrange an interview time directly with the participants. Staff interviews will be capped at 10 participants. Eligible staff will be any member of staff within the school with daily involvement with children's attendance. Participants will be selected on a first-come first-served basis.

If appropriate, upload a copy of the proposed advertisement, including proposed recruitment emails, flyers, posters or invitation letter.

How and when will participants receive this recruitment material?

The recruitment material will be distributed through the school's normal communication channels with parents after ethical approval. The preferred timeframe would be during the summer term 2025.

In terms of UEA participants only, will you be advertising the opportunity to take part in this project to?:

None of the above (i.e. UEA's Student Insight Review Group (SIRG) does not need to be informed)

What are the characteristics of the participants?

A parent or carer will meet the inclusion criteria for the survey if they have at least one primary school-aged child attending the school.

A parent or carer will meet the inclusion criteria for the interviews if they have at least one primary school-aged child attending the school who experiences anxiety around attending school. The child's attendance may not yet have been impacted by the anxiety.

School staff will meet the inclusion criteria if they work within the school and hold a position where they are in the classroom or are involved with attendance. This could include pastoral staff, teachers, teaching assistants or staff with an attendance role.

Will the project require the cooperation of a gatekeeper for initial access to the individuals/groups to be recruited?

Yes

Who will be your gatekeeper for accessing participants?

Head teacher at the school.

How and when will a gatekeeper permission be obtained?

Direct email correspondence at the start of the summer term (22nd April 2025) or once ethics approval has been granted if this is later.

Provide any relevant gatekeeper documentation (letters of invite, emails etc).

How will you record a gatekeeper's permission?

Email records

Is there any sense in which participants might be 'obliged' to participate?

Yes

If yes, provide details.

School staff may feel obliged as part of their role.

Parents and carers may feel that they need to complete the survey as it will be distributed by the school. The researcher will have a dual relationship with the school as part of the EPS in addition to the research role. The researcher has worked with the SENCo and school at a Local Authority systems level but has not carried out direct work in the school.

What will you do to ensure participation is voluntary?

Be clear on the participant information sheet and at each stage of the research process, ensuring that participants give informed consent as described above. The gatekeepers will be aware that participation is voluntary and there is no expectation to participate in the research as a method of support. The research will neither affect nor replace any past, present or future support from the EPS for the school.

Will the project involve vulnerable groups?

No

Will payment or any other incentive be made to any participant?

No

Human participants - consent options

By which method(s) will consent to participate in the research be obtained?:

Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form

Online Participant Information and Consent

Human participants - information and consent

Participant Information and Consent

Will opt out consent for participation in the research be used?

No

You can generate a Participant Information Text and Consent Form for this application by completing information in the Participant Information Text and Consent Form Generator tab. Alternatively you can upload your Participant Information Text and Participant Consent Form which you have already prepared. Confirm below:

Generate automated Participant Information Text and Consent Form.

When will participants receive the participant information and consent request?

After ethical approval and when the gatekeeper has given permission, the flyer will be circulated to parents and emails will be sent to staff. The link on the flyer will take participants directly to the survey. Participant information is provided in the first section and participants need to indicate their consent in order to proceed with the survey.

For interviews, participant information sheets will be included on the contact information form and will also be emailed to those who express an interest in taking part by supplying their email address. An electronic signature will be required to be returned prior to interviews taking place.

How will you record a participant's decision to take part in the research?

Consent to take part in the survey will be captured on the form and participants will only be able to continue once they have indicated that they have read and understood the information and consented to taking part. Consent from the survey is only given when it is submitted so even if participants tick the box, consent will not be given until the form is submitted.

Interview consent forms will be stored securely on a password protected device separately from any interview transcripts.

Human participants - method

Which data collection methods will be used in the research?:

Interview

Anonymous questionnaire

If your research involves any of the methods (including Other) listed above, upload supporting materials.

How have your characteristics, or those of the participants influenced the design of the study or how the research is experienced by participants?

My dual roles of a university researcher and trainee educational psychologist working within the service may affect the way that interviews are viewed. I will signpost participants to supportive resources from the Local Authority but be clear that I am not interviewing them in a consultative capacity.

The design of the study was shaped by the school having raised the issue of EBSA in primary schools and parental concern. The school has previously sought support from the psychology service in delivering workshops for parents. Parents and school have expressed that there is evident school avoidance (such as delaying getting dressed or separation anxiety at the classroom door) even when children may be attending school.

Will the project involve transcripts?

Yes

Select ONE option below:

Transcription software

If yes provide details.

Transcription via Teams where interviews have taken place online, recorded interviews will be played to Teams to produce a transcription.

Will you be capturing photographs or video footage (digital assets) of individuals taken for University business?

No

Is this research using visual/vocal methods where respondents may be identified?

Yes

If yes, confirm what safeguards are in place for participants who are vulnerable or underage.

Some interviews will take place on Teams which records video and audio. Face to face interviews will be recorded on a personal recording device. Recordings will be stored securely on a password protected device until transcriptions are made. After they have been transcribed, interviews will be deleted.

Will it be necessary for participants to take part in the study without their knowledge and consent at the time?

No

Will deception or incomplete disclosure be used?

No

Will the participants be debriefed after data collection?

Yes

If yes, how will they be debriefed and what information will be provided?

Debrief section at the end of the survey will thank the participant for taking part and signpost them to further support.

At the end of the interview, participants will receive a written debrief sheet with thanks for participation, reiteration of the purposes of the study, a reminder of their right to withdraw and signposting to sources of support.

If yes, upload a copy of the debrief information.

Will substances be administered to the participants?

No

Will involvement in the project result in, or the risk of, discomfort, physical harm, psychological harm or intrusive procedures?

Yes

If yes, provide details.

Uncomfortable topics could be explored especially if the parent is having challenges in this area with their child. Participants will not be required to answer any question that they do not want to. The researcher will check in and monitor during the interview and will be clear that the interview can be paused or stopped at any point. Signposting will be given to sources of support.

Will the project involve prolonged or repetitive testing?

No

Will the project involve potentially sensitive topics?

Yes

If yes, provide details.

School avoidance can be an emotive topic for parents as it can have an impact on home life and they may be describing their child's distress. The Psychology and Therapeutic Service has supporting

materials which will be shared with the school and signposted to the parents at the end of the survey and interview via the debrief section.

The school and staff will be supported through materials available through the psychology service and can be signposted to more targeted and bespoke support through the Graduated Response offer. These include multi-professional Solution Circles and specialist teacher mini-consultations.

Will the project involve elite interviews?

No

Will the project involve any incitement to, encouragement of, or participation, in an illegal act (by participant or researcher)?

No

Will the research involve an investigation of people engaged in or supporting activities that compromise computer security or other activities that may normally be considered harmful or unlawful?

No

Does the research involve members of the public in participatory research where they are actively involved in undertaking research tasks?

No

Does the research offer advice or guidance to people?

No

Is the research intended to benefit the participants, third parties or the local community?

Yes

Provide an explanation.

The research will benefit the school in understanding school avoidance and developing strategies to support children. A summary of findings will be shared with the school, staff and parents. This will give a platform for what support may be helpful.

Benefits to the participants will be to give a space to reflect and discuss any concerns and receive signposting to further information and support for them and their child. The findings may open a channel of communication between parents and school, allowing for more understanding of the context of children's concerns around attendance.

What procedures are in place for monitoring the research with respect to ethical compliance?

A number of procedures will be in place including the right to withdraw, anonymity/pseudonymisation, informed consent/PIS sheet and adherence to BERA and BPS guidelines.

Regular supervision from university supervisor will take place to ensure the above are implemented. Weekly supervision with placement supervisor will take place to ensure LA ethics compliance. Any breaches will be reported via ethics monitor.

Does the study involve the use of a clinical or non-clinical scale, questionnaire or inventory which has specific copyright permissions, reproduction or distribution restrictions or training requirements?

Yes

If yes, provide details.

The questionnaire used to develop the survey is based on material from EBSA Horizons. The framework used to underpin the questions has been developed by Trafford Educational Psychology Service. While neither of these documents are copyrighted, permission has been sought from the owners.

Include any other ethical considerations regarding data collection methods.

Interview data will be anonymised in order to prevent identification of participants. A link will be provided to a separate form for participants to submit their contact details if they would like to take part in a semi-structured interview. This will preserve the anonymity of the first questionnaire.

Interviews can take place either online or in person. Online participants will be reminded to attend in a comfortable private space. The researcher will ensure that online interviews are conducted in a confidential space.

In person interviews will take place on the school premises in a confidential space with no interruptions.

Health and safety - participants

Is there a possibility that the health and safety of any of the participants in this project including a support person (e.g. a care giver, school teaching assistant) may be in question?

Yes

If yes, describe the nature of any health and safety concerns to the participants and the steps you will take to minimise these.

Face-to-face interviews will take place in the school building or via Teams according to participants' preferences and availability. The school and Local Authority supervisor will be notified that a meeting is taking place and both researcher and participant will need to sign in to the school building as part of security procedures.

What procedures have been established for the care and protection of participants?

Discussion around children's anxiety is likely to invoke an emotional response in parents and carers, particularly given that they will be recruited from parents who have expressed concern. School avoidance is often very distressing for parents as they may be experiencing daily separation anxiety, not knowing how to handle their child's distress around attending school and may also have repercussions on their own work attendance if a child is struggling to attend school. It is felt that by the school choosing to be involved in this project, parents will feel that there is a willingness to understand and support their child. Resources to support children and families are available through the EPS website and these will be signposted in the recruitment materials.

Describe your safeguarding protocol. What procedures are in place for the appropriate referral of a participant who discloses an emotional, psychological, health, education or other issue during the course of the research or is identified by the researcher to have such a need?

Safeguarding procedures will be followed as set by the school in the first instance with safeguarding issues being reported to the Designated Safeguarding Lead. Any safeguarding issues arising will also be reported to my research and placement supervisors, in line with normal practice.

What is the possible harm to the wider community from their participation or from the project as a whole?

There is potential for negative discussion of how the school deals with school avoidance.

What precautions will you take to minimise any possible harm to the wider community?

The school will be fully aware of the interview schedule and survey questions.

Health and safety - researcher(s)

Is there a possibility that the health and safety of any of the researcher(s) and that of any other people (as distinct from any participants) impacted by this project including research assistants/translators may be in question?

Yes

If yes, how have you addressed the health and safety concerns? Describe any safeguards included and relevant protocols.

Face-to-face interviews will take place in the school building within school hours or via Teams according to participants' preferences and availability. The school will be notified that a meeting is taking place on site and both researcher and participant will need to sign in to the school building as part of security procedures.

For online interviews, participants will be advised to ensure that they are in a confidential space.

Virtual backgrounds or a neutral physical space will be used to protect anonymity of both participant and researcher.

Risk assessment

Are there hazards associated with undertaking this project where a formal risk assessment will be required?

No

Ethics approval external to UEA

Provide details of the external body who is considering or who has provided ethics approval, including their name, address and details of the responsible person there.

Local Authority consent needs to be obtained.

Provide details of UEA's contribution to the study if this is not explicitly clear in the ethics application submitted to the other UK HEI.

N/A

If approval has already been obtained, state the date approval was obtained.

Upload documents related to this ethics approval.

Data management

Will the project involve any personal data (including pseudonymised data) not in the public domain?

Yes

If yes, will any of the personal data be?:

Anonymised and pseudonymised

If using anonymised and/or pseudonymised data, describe the measures that will be implemented to prevent de-anonymisation.

Names will be removed from interview transcripts and participants will be referred to by a pseudonym.

Any identifying information will be mitigated to avoid de-anonymisation. For example identifying details such as contextual information (age, location etc.) will be generalised.

Grouped insights will be used where relevant instead of individual responses and verbatim quotes will not be used if they contain unique expressions that could reveal identity.

Contact details will be submitted on a standalone form to preserve the anonymity of the questionnaire.

If not using anonymised or pseudonymised data, how will you maintain participant confidentiality and comply with data protection requirements?

Will any personal data be processed by another organisation(s)?

No

Will the project involve access to records of sensitive/confidential information?

No

Will the project involve access to confidential business data?

No

Will the project involve secure data that requires permission from the appropriate authorities before use?

No

Will you be using publicly available data from the internet for your study?

No

Will the research data in this study be deposited in a repository to allow it to be made available for scholarly and educational purposes?

No

Provide details.

A suitable repository for the data is not available

Who will have access to the data during and after the project?

Researcher and supervisor

Where/how do you intend to store the data during and after the project?

Data will be stored on the researcher's university OneDrive. After graduation, anonymised data will be stored on a password protected personal OneDrive account.

How will you ensure the secure storage of the data during and after the project?

Data will be stored on encrypted OneDrive during the project using UEA username. After graduation, the researcher will lose access to OneDrive and will store the data in line with the UEA Information Classification and Data Management Policy. The data will be transferred securely to a password protected personal OneDrive account.

How long will research data be stored after the study has ended?

Ten years from last use.

How long will research data be accessible after the study has ended?

Ten years from last use.

How are you intending to destroy the project data when it is no longer required?

Deletion of all digital data. No other data will be stored.

Appendix I: Approved Significant Amendments Ethics Application for UEA

Ethics ETH2526-1159 (Significant amendments): Mrs Charis Gates

Date Created	18 Dec 2025
Date Submitted	18 Dec 2025
Date forwarded to committee	13 Jan 2026
Researcher	Mrs Charis Gates
Category	PGR
Supervisor	Dr Kimberley Bartholomew
Faculty	Faculty of Social Sciences
Current status	Approved

Ethics application

Amendment type

Type of amendment

Change to research protocol

Is this amendment related to Covid-19?

No

Change research protocol

Describe changes

Fully describe any changes and upload revised documentation if there are wording changes.

I will recruit parents for interviews using the attached advertisement. This advert will be shared through the same school channels as the previously approved anonymous survey. Parents who express interest, either by submitting their email via the form or by contacting me directly, will be sent the already approved Participant Information Sheet (PIS) for interviews. This follows the same protocol previously used to register interest in interviews, with the only amendment being that interest will now be registered directly rather than through completing the survey.

Attach any documentation which relates to the changes described.

Change your original application submitted in Ethics Monitor

Select the relevant tab(s) from your original ethics application to edit:

Human participants - method

If other, fully describe the changes below.

Attach any documentation which relates to the changes described.

Human participants - method

Which data collection methods will be used in the research?:

Interview

Focus group

Anonymous questionnaire

If your research involves any of the methods (including Other) listed above, upload supporting materials.

How have your characteristics, or those of the participants influenced the design of the study or how the research is experienced by participants?

My dual roles of a university researcher and trainee educational psychologist working within the service may affect the way that interviews are viewed. I will signpost participants to supportive resources from the Local Authority but be clear that I am not interviewing them in a consultative capacity.

The design of the study was shaped by the school having raised the issue of EBSA in primary schools and parental concern. The school has previously sought support from the psychology service in delivering workshops for parents. Parents and school have expressed that there is evident school avoidance (such as delaying getting dressed or separation anxiety at the classroom door) even when children may be attending school.

Will the project involve transcripts?

Yes

Select ONE option below:

Transcription software

If yes provide details.

Transcription via Teams where interviews have taken place online, recorded interviews will be played to Teams to produce a transcription.

Will you be capturing photographs or video footage (digital assets) of individuals taken for University business?

No

Is this research using visual/vocal methods where respondents may be identified?

Yes

If yes, confirm what safeguards are in place for participants who are vulnerable or underage.

Some interviews will take place on Teams which records video and audio. Face to face interviews will be recorded on a personal recording device. Recordings will be stored securely on a password protected device until transcriptions are made. After they have been transcribed, interviews will be deleted.

Will the project involve elite interviews?

No

Will the project involve any incitement to, encouragement of, or participation, in an illegal act (by participant or researcher)?

No

Will the research involve an investigation of people engaged in or supporting activities that compromise computer security or other activities that may normally be considered harmful or unlawful?

No

Does the research involve members of the public in participatory research where they are actively involved in undertaking research tasks?

No

Does the research offer advice or guidance to people?

No

Is the research intended to benefit the participants, third parties or the local community?

Yes

Provide an explanation.

The research will benefit the school in understanding school avoidance and developing strategies to support children. A summary of findings will be shared with the school, staff and parents. This will give a platform for what support may be helpful.

Benefits to the participants will be to give a space to reflect and discuss any concerns and receive signposting to further information and support for them and their child. The findings may open a channel of communication between parents and school, allowing for more understanding of the context of children's concerns around attendance.

What procedures are in place for monitoring the research with respect to ethical compliance?

A number of procedures will be in place including the right to withdraw, anonymity/pseudonymisation, informed consent/PIS sheet and adherence to BERA and BPS guidelines.

Regular supervision from university supervisor will take place to ensure the above are implemented. Weekly supervision with placement supervisor will take place to ensure LA ethics compliance. Any breaches will be reported via ethics monitor.

Does the study involve the use of a clinical or non-clinical scale, questionnaire or inventory which has specific copyright permissions, reproduction or distribution restrictions or training requirements?

Yes

If yes, provide details.

Will it be necessary for participants to take part in the study without their knowledge and consent at the time?

No

Will deception or incomplete disclosure be used?

No

Will the participants be debriefed after data collection?

Yes

If yes, how will they be debriefed and what information will be provided?

Debrief section at the end of the survey will thank the participant for taking part and signpost them to further support.

At the end of the interview, participants will receive a written debrief sheet with thanks for participation, reiteration of the purposes of the study, a reminder of their right to withdraw and signposting to sources of support.

If yes, upload a copy of the debrief information.

Will substances be administered to the participants?

No

Will involvement in the project result in, or the risk of, discomfort, physical harm, psychological harm or intrusive procedures?

Yes

If yes, provide details.

Uncomfortable topics could be explored especially if the parent is having challenges in this area with their child. Participants will not be required to answer any question that they do not want to. The researcher will check in and monitor during the interview and will be clear that the interview can be paused or stopped at any point. Signposting will be given to sources of support.

Will the project involve prolonged or repetitive testing?

No

Will the project involve potentially sensitive topics?

Yes

If yes, provide details.

School avoidance can be an emotive topic for parents as it can have an impact on home life and they may be describing their child's distress. The Psychology and Therapeutic Service has supporting materials which will be shared with the school and signposted to the parents at the end of the survey and interview via the debrief section.

The school and staff will be supported through materials available through the psychology service and can be signposted to more targeted and bespoke support through the Graduated Response offer. These include multi-professional Solution Circles and specialist teacher mini-consultations.

The questionnaire used to develop the survey is based on material from EBSA Horizons. The framework used to underpin the questions has been developed by Trafford Educational Psychology Service. While neither of these documents are copyrighted, permission has been sought from the owners.

Include any other ethical considerations regarding data collection methods.

Interview data will be anonymised in order to prevent identification of participants. A link will be provided to a separate form for participants to submit their contact details if they would like to take part in a semi-structured interview. This will preserve the anonymity of the first questionnaire.

Interviews can take place either online or in person. Online participants will be reminded to attend in a comfortable private space. The researcher will ensure that online interviews are conducted in a confidential space.

In person interviews will take place on the school premises in a confidential space with no interruptions.

For focus groups = group dynamics in terms of seniority of staff will be considered and consent to attendance will be made clear. All participants in the focus groups will be from the same school and it will be reiterated that it is a confidential environment with no discussion to be referred to outside of the room.

Appendix J: Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form - Interviews

Mrs Charis Gates

Faculty of Social
Sciences

School of Education
and Lifelong Learning

Postgraduate Researcher

Anxiety around school attendance in primary school aged children

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

(1) What is this study about?

You are invited to take part in a research study about children who experience worries or concerns around attending school. The research will focus on how parents and school staff notice school avoidance in primary school aged children. You have been invited to participate in this study because you are either (a) the parent or carer of a child who is of primary school age who has expressed concerns about your child's anxiety around attending school or (b), you are a member of school staff who has experienced working with children who have anxiety around attending school and have a classroom, pastoral or attendance role.

This Participant Information Sheet tells you about the research study. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to take part in the study. Please read this sheet carefully and ask questions about anything that you don't understand or want to know more about.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. By giving consent to take part in this study you are telling us that you:

- ✓ Understand what you have read.
- ✓ Agree to take part in the research study as outlined below.
- ✓ Agree to the use of your personal information as described.
- ✓ You have received a copy of this Participant Information Sheet to keep.

(2) Who is running the study?

The study is being carried out by the following researcher(s): Mrs Charis Gates. Postgraduate Researcher, Doctorate of Educational Psychology, School of Education and Lifelong Learning, University of East Anglia (Charis.Gates@uea.ac.uk).

This will take place under the supervision of Dr Kimberley Bartholomew (K.Bartholomew@uea.ac.uk,).

(3) What will the study involve for me?

Interviews will take place face-to-face at the school or online via Teams, depending on your preference.

If you are a parent/carer, questions will be about your child's worries or concerns about attending school, how these show up and the strategies that support them.

School staff will be asked about their experiences of working with children experiencing anxiety around attending school and their families.

An audio/video recording will be taken.

You will have the opportunity to review your transcripts prior to publication. You can request this by contacting me by email.

(4) How much of my time will the study take?

Interviews will last around one hour.

(5) Do I have to be in the study? Can I withdraw from the study once I have started?

Being in this study is completely voluntary and you do not have to take part.

Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia (or [REDACTED] County Council) now or in the future.

If you decide to take part in the study, you can withdraw your consent up to the point that your data is analysed. You can do this by email.

(6) What are the consequences if I withdraw from the study?

You are free to stop the interview at any time. Unless you say that you want us to keep them, any recordings will be erased and the information you have provided will not be included in the study results. You may also refuse to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer during the interview. If you decide at a later time to withdraw from the study your information will be removed from our records and will not be included in any results, up to the point we have analysed and published the results.

(7) Are there any risks or costs associated with being in the study?

Aside from giving up your time, we do not expect that there will be any risks or costs associated with taking part in this study. However talking about children's worries can be emotional for parents, carers and school staff. You will be able to access helpful support materials from the Psychology and Therapeutic Service which will be shared with the school and in the debriefing sheet after the interview.

(8) Are there any benefits associated with being in the study?

Participating in this study offers several benefits. It provides an opportunity for participants to have an in-depth discussion about concerns related to school-related worries. By hearing from parents and school staff, we will gain valuable insights into why some young children feel anxious and avoid school, as well as the factors contributing to these feelings. This understanding can help the school and Psychology and Therapeutic Service to develop strategies to support children in managing their emotions and feeling more comfortable and confident at school.

(9) What will happen to information provided by me and data collected during the study?

Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Analysis will be made of the transcriptions which will be anonymised. Excerpts from interviews may be included in the published study but the participant will not be identifiable.

Your personal data and information will only be used as outlined in this Participant Information Sheet, unless you consent otherwise. Data management will follow the Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA 2018) and UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) and the University of East Anglia's [Research Data Management Policy](#).

The information you provide will be stored securely and your identity will be kept strictly confidential, except as required by law. Study findings may be published

and may also be used for other scholarly and educational purposes such as in teaching, but you will not be identified if you decide to participate in this study. The data will be kept for at least 10 years beyond the last date the data were used.

(10) What if I would like further information about the study?

When you have read this information, Mrs Charis Gates (Charis.Gates@uea.ac.uk, \$ Null Qualifier) will be available to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have.

(11) Will I be told the results of the study?

You have the right to receive feedback on the overall results of this study, which will be provided in the form of a one-page summary. This summary will be sent to the school and distributed during the autumn term of 2026.

(12) What if I have a complaint or any concerns about the study?

If there is a problem please let me know. You can contact me via the University of East Anglia at the following address:

Mrs Charis Gates

School of Education and Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia

NORWICH NR4 7TJ

Charis.Gates@uea.ac.uk

If you are concerned about the way this study is being conducted please contact my supervisor, Dr Kimberley Bartholomew (K.Bartholomew@uea.ac.uk) or if you wish to make a complaint to someone independent from the study, please

contact the Head of School of Education and Lifelong Learning: Professor Yann Lebeau (Y.Lebeau@uea.ac.uk).

(13) How do I know that this study has been approved to take place?

To protect your safety, rights, wellbeing and dignity, all research in the University of East Anglia is reviewed by a Research Ethics Body. This research was approved by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee).

(14) What is the general data protection information I need to be informed about?

According to data protection legislation, we are required to inform you that the legal basis for processing your data as listed in Article 6(1) of the UK GDPR is because this allows us to process personal data when it is necessary to perform our public tasks as a University.

In addition to the specific information provided above about why your personal data is required and how it will be used, there is also some general information which needs to be provided for you:

- The data controller is the University of East Anglia.
- For further information, you can contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@uea.ac.uk
- You can also find out more about your data protection rights at the [Information Commissioner's Office \(ICO\)](https://ico.org.uk/).
- If you are unhappy with how your personal data has been used, please contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@uea.ac.uk in the first instance.

(15) OK, I want to take part - what do I do next?

You need to fill in one copy of the consent form and email it to Charis.Gates@uea.ac.uk. Please keep the letter, information sheet and the second copy of the consent form for your information.

(16) Further information

This information was last updated on 11th July 2025.

If there are changes to the information provided, you will be notified by email.

This information sheet is for you to keep

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (First Copy to Researcher)

I, ... [PRINT NAME], **am**
willing to participate in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

- I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do and any risks/benefits involved.
- I have read the Participant Information Sheet, which I may keep, for my records and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.
- The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.
- I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia (or ██████ County Council) now or in the future.
- I understand that I may stop the interview at any time if I do not wish to continue and that unless I indicate otherwise any recordings will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study results. I also understand that I may refuse to answer any questions I don't wish to answer.
- I understand that the results of this study will be used in the way described in the information sheet.
- I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for

purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.

I consent to:

Audio-recording

YES ☐ NO ☐

Video-recording

YES ☐ NO ☐

Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study?

YES ☐ NO ☐

If you answered YES, please indicate your preferred form of feedback and address:

☐ Postal: _____

☐ Email: _____

.....

Signature

.....

PRINT name

.....

Date

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (Second Copy to Participant)

I, ... [PRINT NAME], am willing to participate in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

- I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do and any risks/benefits involved.
- I have read the Participant Information Sheet, which I may keep, for my records and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.
- The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.
- I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia (or ██████ County Council) now or in the future.
- I understand that I may stop the interview at any time if I do not wish to continue and that unless I indicate otherwise any recordings will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study results. I also understand that I may refuse to answer any questions I don't wish to answer.
- I understand that the results of this study will be used in the way described in the information sheet.
- I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for

purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.

I consent to:

Audio-recording

YES ☐ NO ☐

Video-recording

YES ☐ NO ☐

Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study?

YES ☐ NO ☐

If you answered YES, please indicate your preferred form of feedback and address:

☐ Postal: _____

☐ Email: _____

.....

Signature

.....

PRINT name

.....

Date

Appendix K: Final Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subthemes
Theme 1: EBSA begins early and develops through subtle signs of distress	Somatic expressions of distress; Anticipatory anxiety across time; Fluctuating and inconsistent presentation; Gradual escalation over time
Theme 2: Attendance difficulty reflects unmet need and environmental factors	Emotional and cognitive overload; Sensory differences; Relationships and belonging; Competing demands across systems
Theme 3: Relational safety is a core protective factor	Emotional co-regulation; Micro-relational practices; Trust and familiarity; Relational rupture and disconnection
Theme 4: Primary schools sustain attendance through flexible, relational adaptation	Flexible entry and transitions; Micro-adjustments to reduce distress; Informal relational support; Early preventative mindset
Theme 5: Family experience is central to EBSA	Emotional impact on parents; Parental co-regulation; Experiences of judgement and misunderstanding
Theme 6: Transition and systems can amplify risk	Increased structural demands and reduced flexibility; Misalignment of attendance systems; Gaps in service provision and systemic fragmentation