

School Avoidance and Anxiety: A School Perspective



PRESENTED BY

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Refusal? Or Distress?

He just needs to build more resilience

Is it because his Dad has been away this week?

We can't make allowances for him - it isn't fair on the other children

We'll hang onto him; once you're out of sight he'll calm down. Trust us, we've done this before.

Having a day at home will only make it worse the next day.

Of course he prefers being at home - wouldn't anyone? But we have to do things we don't like - that's life.

Bring him in in his pyjamas. He'll only do it once!

Can't rule the roost: you have to be consistently firm.

The scale of the issue

(DfE, October 2025)

Percentage of
persistent absentees
(10% or more missed)

17.63%

1.29 million pupils

Percentage of severe
absentees (50% or
more missed)

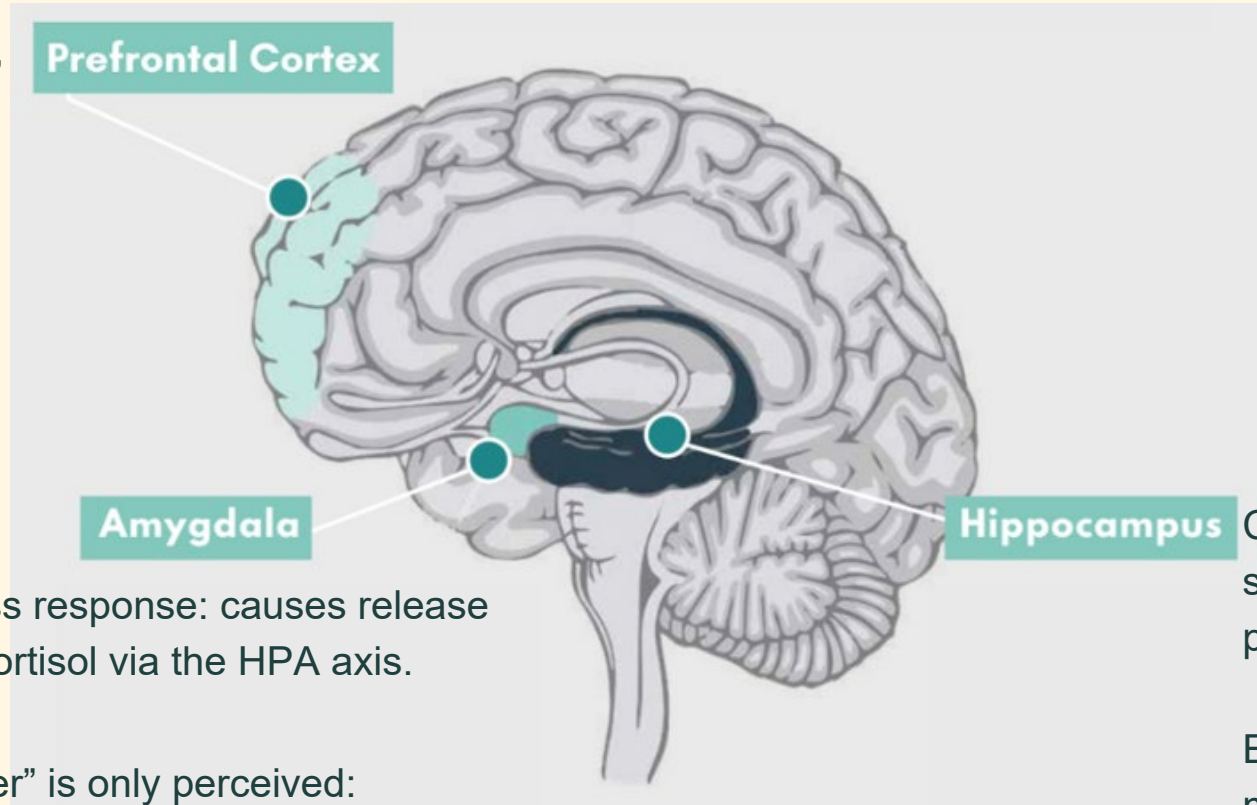
2.26%

166,000 pupils

(an increase from this time last year)

When school = threat .

Working memory, attention, and curiosity
Required for learning.



Triggers the stress response: causes release of adrenaline & cortisol via the HPA axis.

Even if the “danger” is only perceived:

- a teacher’s sharp tone,
- unpredictability of a busy corridor,
- fear of getting something wrong in front of peers.

The stress response is the same; the amygdala doesn’t distinguish between a tiger and a timetable.

Inhibits PFC functioning.

Hippocampus Can shrink when stress is prolonged.

Emotional memories are deeply imprinted.

Until the child feels safe, school learning can be extremely limited.

Environment \neq Child Needs?

EBSA isn't a 'behavioural' issue, or a 'problem child' issue; it's an environmental mismatch:

what school
demands



VS

what the child's
nervous system
can manage.



“There is a problem for the system.

The way we school children isn't designed for psychological flourishing; it is designed for curriculum delivery.”

Dr Naomi Fisher

Conditions for flourishing at school?

Autonomy

a sense of
control & choice
over what we do

Competence

a feeling that we
are capable,
effective, and can
succeed.

Relatedness

feeling connected
to and accepted
by others.

When these needs are met, we
experience **intrinsic motivation.**

Typical/traditional schooling?

Autonomy

a sense of control & choice over what we do



Rigid timetables, fixed seating, uniforms etc.
Rewards and punishments remove agency.

Competence

a feeling that we are capable, effective, and can succeed.



Constant comparison, grading, and high-stakes testing make many children feel perpetually “not good enough.”

Relatedness

feeling connected to and accepted by others.



Crowded classrooms, not knowing everyone's names, limited relational time, use of detention & isolation to control behaviour fracture trust.

Early years

Free Flow between indoors and outdoors

Follow curiosity

Go to the loo when they need to

Have a snack when they're hungry

Enjoy school?

Year 7

Bells

Blazers

50 minute lessons

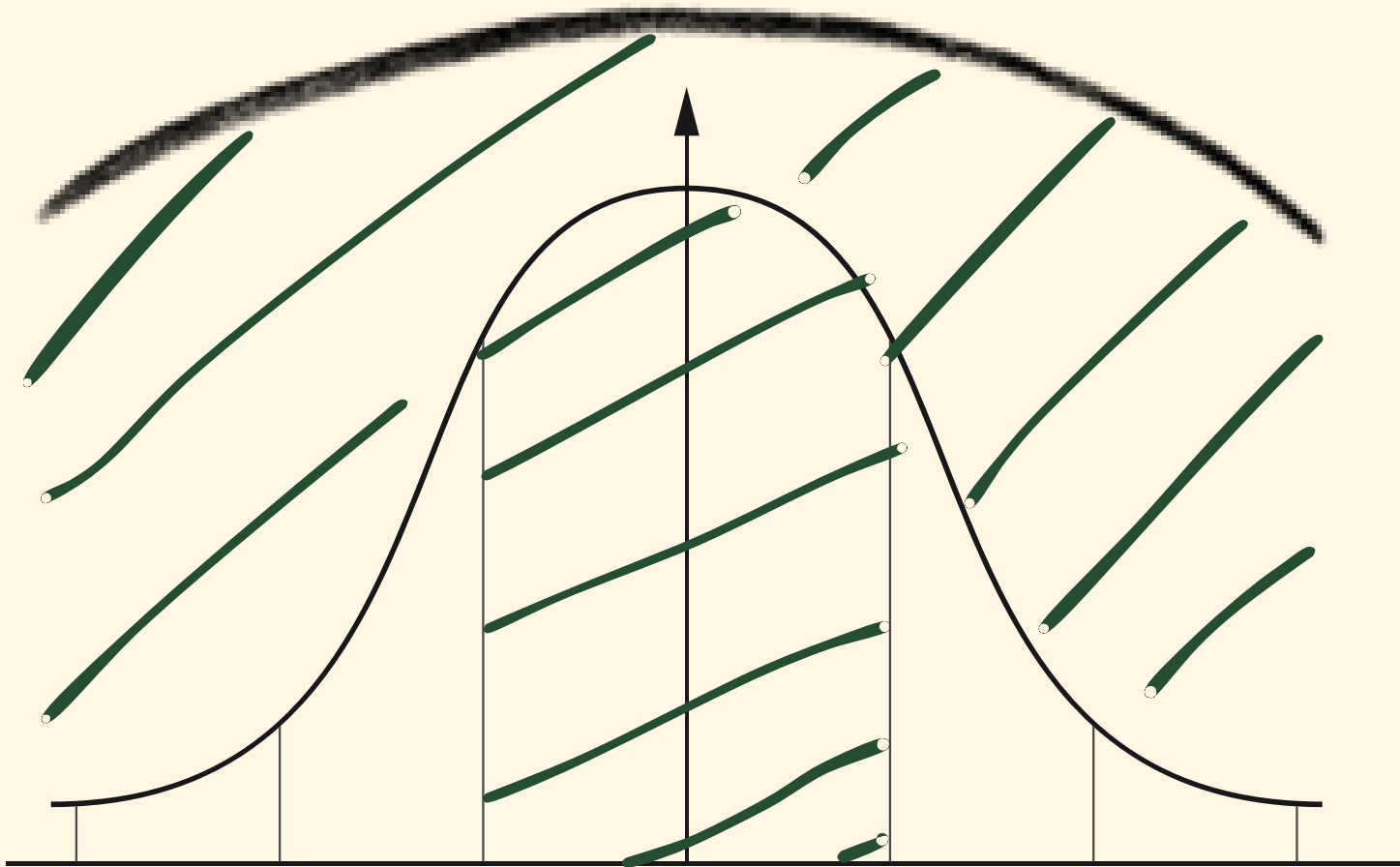
Need permission to go to the loo

Sanctions & rewards

Endure school?

“We have to cater for the middle of the bell curve.”

School group owner.



If a child told us they dreaded going home - that they cried silently every night - we'd call it a safeguarding concern.

So why, when they say the same about school, do we call it 'non-attendance?'

I wonder why we shift the problem into the child?

Lack of competence

I just want to be a normal boy. I want to be able to go to school. I'm so sorry.

Lack of autonomy

School feels like a prison. I'm trapped. I have no say in anything that happens to me.

I've cried silently every maths lesson this term. My teacher hasn't noticed.

Lack of connectedness

No one understands me. I feel very alone. Sometimes I think the only way to stop feeling like this would be to die. But that would upset my parents and sisters.

The numbers tell us that emotional distress in relation to school attendance is not marginal - and growing.

- Before the pandemic, absence (all cause) was ~4 -5%.
- In 2021/22 it rose to ~7.6%¹

Together Trust:

- Between 2022-23 and 2023-24 the number of families they supported with EBSA-related issues doubled.
- In 2022-23 there were ~150,000 “severely absent” children, an increase of ~30,000 from the previous year.
- Waiting lists for CAMHS are increasing
- Diagnoses are increasing

School systems are going to have to respond in some way.

So what can schools actually do?

- Have a safe place. A trusted person (and access to them).
 - Give children agency wherever possible.
 - Enrich learning with purpose and meaning.
- Build predictability and co -regulation into every day.
 - Reduce stressful transitions.
 - Create sensory-aware classrooms.
- Put relationships before attendance targets.
 - Use flexible timetables.
- Train staff in stress and trauma responses.

We've tried "tough love" for a
century.

Perhaps it's time for just...
love.

A school for the future?

As much **agency** to children as possible. We work as their partners, not above them.

Trusting relationships are woven through everything we do.

Real-world projects: everything has purpose and meaning.

Real experts coming in and out; trips to workplaces to see their learning in action.

No punishments. No house-point charts. We won't **use stress** to externally motivate.

No uniforms: wear what makes you feel comfortable.

Longer, deeper learning blocks, so we can go deep, find flow, and remove the constant churn of transitions.

A school that prepares children for the **real world**, by resembling it.



A happy ending!

**Fancy joining us at the start of something
powerful?**

**We're not here to tweak the system: we're
here to build what comes next.**

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