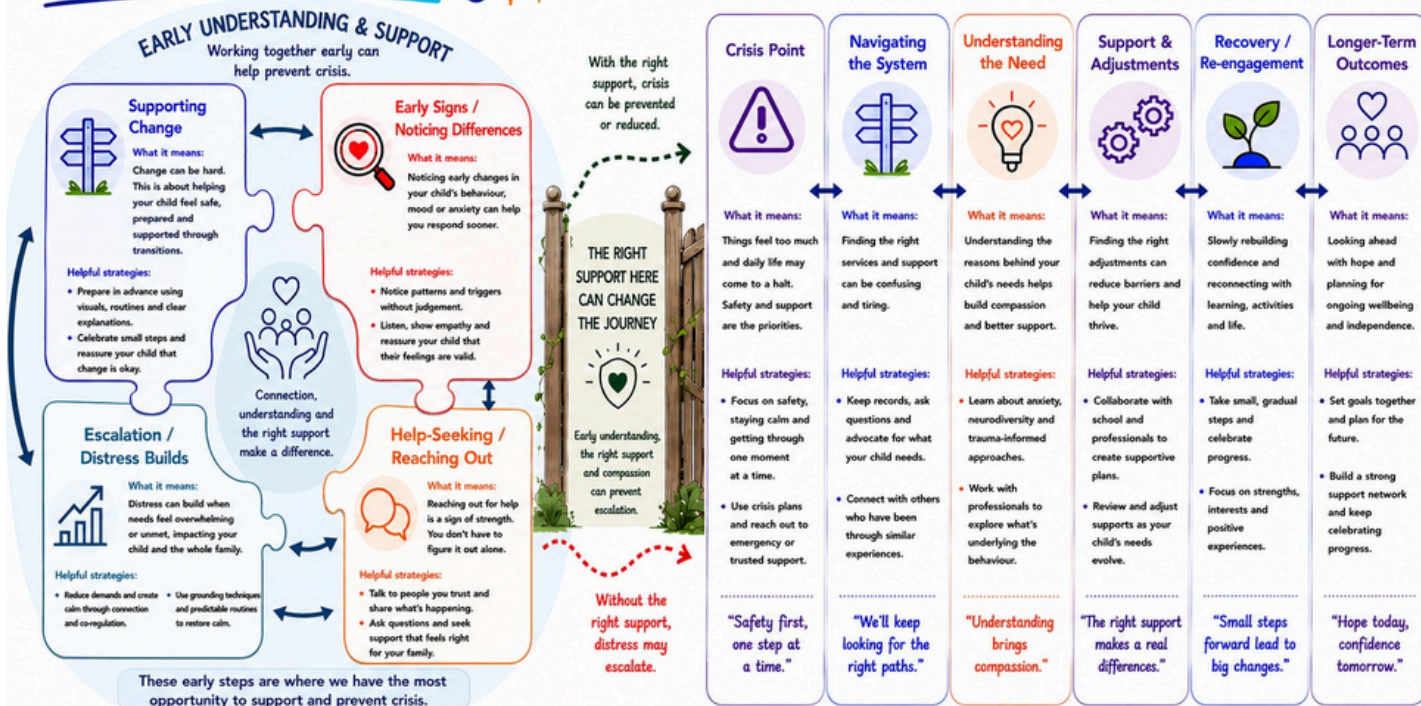


EBSA LISTENING & CO-PRODUCTION REPORT

Hearing the Voices of Families, Young People & Professionals

The EBSA Journey

Every journey is different, but no family should have to go through it alone.



EBSA is a journey – not a moment. | Early understanding, the right support and compassion can change everything for our children and families.

INTRODUCTION

Southampton Parent Carer Forum (SPCF) carried out a series of engagement activities to better understand the experiences of children and young people experiencing Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA), and the impact this has on families, schools and wider services.

The purpose of this work was to:

- Hear lived experiences directly from families and young people.
- Understand barriers to support and education.
- Explore what has helped and what has not worked well.
- Identify opportunities for earlier intervention and improved support.
- Ensure future EBSA developments are informed by real experiences.

This work was built around the EBSA Journey Framework, which explores the different stages families may experience, from early signs and transitions through to recovery and longer-term outcomes.

The questions used during workshops and engagement activities were linked directly to the EBSA Journey stages to ensure families could reflect on experiences across the whole journey, not just moments of crisis.

Feedback was captured through structured co-production discussions, written reflections, workshop activities and lived experience sharing. Including;

Face-to-Face Engagement - 2 in-person EBSA workshops

- Delivered in partnership with professionals and parent carers.
- Included structured discussions, written feedback activities and group reflection.

Online Engagement - 1 online EBSA workshop

- Enabled wider participation from families unable to attend in person.
- Included discussion, shared experiences and written contributions.

Additional Feedback Gathering - Alongside workshops, feedback was also received through:

- Emails from families.
- Text messages.
- Social media conversations.
- Written case studies.
- Informal conversations.
- Professional reflections.

This ensured a broad range of voices and experiences were captured.

Participation - We heard from families and professionals across education, health and social care.



Parent Carers

37



Young people

3



Professionals

24

Professionals included representatives from:

- School staff including teaching staff (Primary and Secondary), SENCOs (Primary and Secondary), ELSAs and attendance staff (Primary and Secondary)
- Mental Health Support Teams (MHST)
- Alternative Provision settings who support those with EBSA
- Social Care including Early Help
- Foster and adoption related services
- Neurodiversity team

How We Captured Information

Feedback was structured around the EBSA Journey and accompanying question prompts.

The EBSA Journey framework explored:

0. Supporting Change
1. Early Signs / Noticing Differences
2. Escalation / Distress Builds
3. Help-Seeking / Reaching Out
4. Crisis Point
5. Navigating the System
6. Understanding the Need
7. Support & Adjustments
8. Recovery / Re-engagement
9. Longer-Term Outcomes

Families and professionals were encouraged to:

- Share personal experiences.
- Reflect on what helped and what made things harder.
- Identify gaps in support.
- Suggest improvements.
- Highlight examples of good practice.

The approach aimed to create a safe, validating and collaborative space where experiences could be explored honestly and without judgement.

This was the prompt sheet shared at the events to support the open conversations.

<p>0</p> <p>Supporting Change</p>  <p>0. Supporting Change</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What transitions or changes were most difficult for your child?• How did your child respond to change or uncertainty?• What helped your child feel safe, prepared or supported during transitions?• Were transitions planned well and communicated clearly? <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none">♥ What information or support would have helped earlier?💬 What could schools or services do differently to better support children through change and transitions?	<p>1</p> <p>Early Signs / Noticing Differences</p>  <p>1. Early Signs / Noticing Differences</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What were the first signs that something wasn't right for your child?• How did your child show their distress or anxiety?• Did you feel your concerns were taken seriously at this stage? <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none">♥ What would have helped earlier?💬 What information or support did you need at this point?
<p>2</p> <p>Escalation / Distress Builds</p>  <p>2. Escalation / Distress Builds</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How did things change or escalate over time?• What impact did this have on your child and family?• How did school respond at this stage? <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none">♥ What could have been done differently to prevent things escalating?💬 What support would have made a difference here?	<p>3</p> <p>Help-Seeking / Reaching Out</p>  <p>3. Help-Seeking / Reaching Out</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Who did you first go to for help?• What response did you receive?• Did you feel listened to and understood? <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none">♥ What worked well when you asked for help?💬 What barriers did you face?💬 What would have improved this experience?
<p>4</p> <p>Crisis Point</p>  <p>4. Crisis Point</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What did crisis look like for your child and family?• What impact did this have on daily life?• What support was offered at this stage? <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none">♥ Did support come at the right time?💬 What immediate support did you need but not receive?	<p>5</p> <p>Navigating the System</p>  <p>5. Navigating the System</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What services or professionals were involved?• How easy or difficult was it to access support?• Did you have to repeat your story multiple times? <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none">♥ What challenges did you face when navigating the system?💬 What would make the system easier for families?
<p>6</p> <p>Understanding the Need</p>  <p>6. Understanding the Need</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• When did you start to understand the reasons behind your child's school avoidance?• Who helped you reach that understanding?• Did professionals recognise your child's needs? <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none">♥ What helped shift understanding from "won't" to "can't"?💬 What would have helped this happen sooner?	<p>7</p> <p>Support & Adjustments</p>  <p>7. Support & Adjustments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What support or adjustments were put in place?• Did these meet your child's needs?• How consistent was the support? <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none">♥ What worked well?💬 What didn't work?💬 What additional support was needed?
<p>8</p> <p>Recovery / Re-engagement</p>  <p>8. Recovery / Re-engagement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What helped your child begin to re-engage (if they have)?• What challenges are still present?• How long did the process take? <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none">♥ What support made the biggest difference?💬 What would help sustain progress?	<p>9</p> <p>Longer-Term Outcomes</p>  <p>9. Longer-Term Outcomes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What is your child's current situation?• Do you feel this meets their needs?• How has this journey impacted your family long-term? <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none">♥ Looking back, what would you change?💬 What advice would you give other parents?

WHAT WE HEARD

Below is a summary of the key themes identified through the feedback gathered. A more detailed breakdown of findings mapped against each stage of the EBSA Journey can be found in the appendix.

1. EBSA is Often a Gradual Journey

Families consistently described EBSA as developing over time rather than appearing suddenly.

Early signs included:

- Anxiety before school.
- Physical symptoms such as stomach aches, headaches and nausea.
- Exhaustion and emotional burnout.
- Friendship difficulties and bullying.
- Increased distress around transitions and uncertainty.
- Emotional masking.
- Withdrawal and low mood.

2. Families Often Felt Dismissed

A strong theme across the feedback was that families frequently felt:

- Blamed.
- Judged.
- Not listened to.
- Positioned as the problem.
- Pressured around attendance without emotional support.


Parents described schools sometimes focusing on:

- Attendance data.
- Punitive approaches.
- Behaviour management.

Rather than:

- Emotional safety.
- Understanding unmet needs.
- Building trust and relationships.

Many families said they had to repeatedly fight to have concerns recognised.



“We knew something wasn’t right long before support arrived.”

3. Emotional Safety Must Come Before Attendance

Families repeatedly shared that:

- Children cannot learn when they do not feel emotionally safe.
- Punishment and pressure often escalated distress.
- Trusting relationships were central to progress.

Young people particularly valued:

- Trusted adults.
- Predictability.
- Calm environments.
- Flexible support.
- Feeling understood and believed.

4. Transitions are a Significant Risk Point

Transitions were identified as one of the biggest triggers for EBSA escalation.

Families described difficulties around:

- Primary to secondary transition.
- Lack of preparation.
- Limited transition visits.
- Inconsistent communication.
- Fear of unfamiliar environments and staff.

Many felt transition planning:

- Started too late.
- Was too brief.
- Did not consider emotional readiness.

Families asked for:

- Earlier planning.
- More visits.
- Visual supports.
- Transition videos.
- Relationship building before transition.

5. Support Across Systems Felt Fragmented

Families often described feeling:

- Passed between services.
- Repeating their story multiple times.
- Unsure who was responsible for support.



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Primary to secondary transition.



Lack of preparation.



Limited transition visits.



Inconsistent communication.



Fear of unfamiliar environments and staff.

Many felt transition planning:



Started too late.



Was too brief.



Did not consider emotional readiness.



Families asked for:



Earlier planning.



More visits.



Visual supports.



Transition videos.



Relationship building before transition.



When transitions are planned with time, compassion and understanding, children feel safer and more able to succeed.

The right start can make all the difference.



There was significant confusion around:

- EBSA pathways.
- Referral routes.
- Thresholds.
- Access to services.

Parents highlighted challenges navigating:

- CAMHS.
- Schools.
- Attendance teams.
- Alternative Provision.
- Social Care.
- Mental Health services.
- Local Authority systems.

Many professionals were described as working hard individually, but families often experienced systems as disconnected.

6. The Impact on Families is Significant - See next page for a graphic explaining this

Families described:

- Isolation.
- Emotional exhaustion.
- Financial pressures.
- Family breakdown.
- Anxiety and burnout.
- Loss of employment.
- Constant stress and hypervigilance.

Parents also spoke about:

- Their own mental health being overlooked.
- Feeling unsupported while trying to support their child.
- The emotional toll of daily attendance battles.

7. What Helped Families Most

Despite challenges, families identified many examples of good practice.

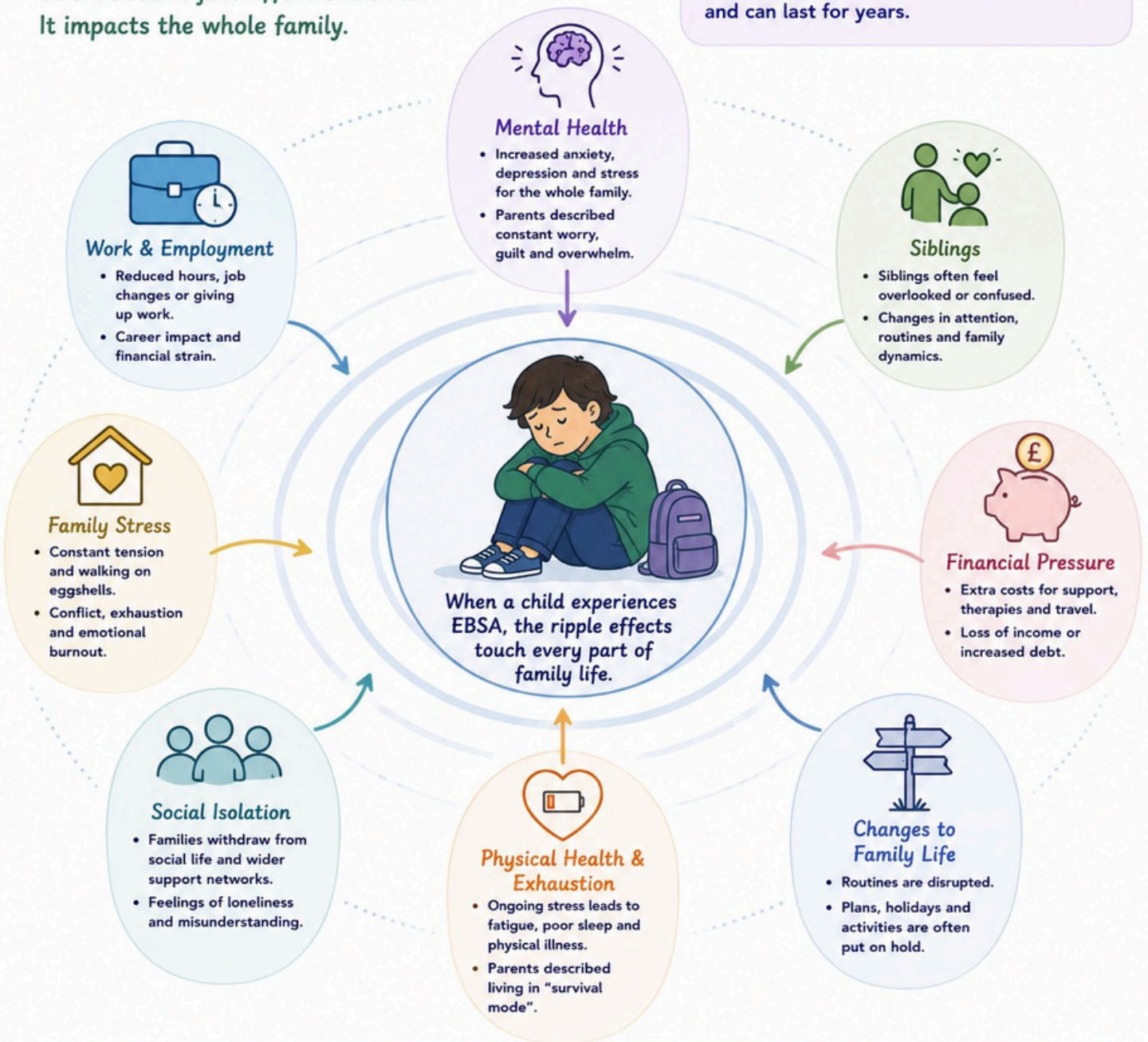
Helpful support included:

- Trusted relationships with staff.
- Named key adults.
- Home visits.
- Flexible timetables.
- Reduced timetables used appropriately.
- ELSA support.
- Mentoring.
- Calm spaces.
- Soft starts.

The Ripple Effect


EBSA doesn't just affect the child.
It impacts the whole family.

Families told us that EBSA creates pressure in every part of family life. The impact is wide-reaching, exhausting and can last for years.



Every family is different.

But one message is clear: EBSA affects the whole family system, not just the child.

Families need compassion, understanding and joined-up support to heal and move forward together. 

- Regular communication.
- Listening to the child’s voice.
- Strengths-based approaches.
- Collaborative planning.

Families consistently valued:

- Compassion.
- Consistency.
- Communication.
- Flexibility.
- Feeling heard.

8. EBSA is Linked to Wider Needs

Many families described EBSA as closely connected to:

- Autism.
- ADHD.
- Trauma.
- Sensory differences.
- Social anxiety.
- Mental health difficulties.
- Burnout.

Families emphasised that:

“EBSA is not just about school refusal.”

Many children struggled across multiple environments and situations, not just education settings.

KEY MESSAGES FROM FAMILIES

Families told us they want:

- Earlier intervention.
- Better understanding of EBSA.
- Less judgement and blame.
- More compassionate approaches.
- Better communication between services.
- Improved transition support.
- More emotionally safe school environments.
- Better professional understanding of masking, burnout and neurodivergence.
- Consistency across services.
- Support for parents as well as children.

Key Messages from Families

These are the things families told us matter most.

2 Better understanding of EBSA

Recognise EBSA for what it is – not just 'school refusal'.



1 Earlier intervention

Spot early signs and act before crisis escalates.



3 Less judgement and blame

Stop assuming families or children are the problem.



4 More compassionate approaches

Treat children and families with kindness, empathy and patience.



5 Better communication between services

Share information, work together and put families at the centre.



6 Improved transition support

Plan early, involve families and make transitions less overwhelming.



7 More emotionally safe school environments

Places where children feel safe, accepted and able to be themselves.



8 Better professional understanding

Understand masking, burnout and neurodivergence so support is right for every child.



9 Consistency across services

The same information, the same approach, every time.



10 Support for parents as well as children

Listen to parents, support their wellbeing and walk alongside them.



“What families want most is to be heard, understood and supported – not judged.”



At the heart of every message is...

Compassion, understanding and hope.



SUPPORT NEEDED

Support for Families

Families highlighted the importance of:

- Peer support.
- Safe spaces to talk.
- Feeling less isolated.
- Emotional validation.
- Access to practical guidance.
- Support navigating systems.
- Clear communication and signposting.
-

Many families said simply hearing: “You are not alone” made a significant difference.

Families consistently asked for:

- More empathy.
- Better communication.
- Collaborative working with parents.

Support for Professionals

Feedback also highlighted the importance of supporting professionals.

Families recognised that many staff want to help but need:

- More training.
- Better understanding of EBSA.
- Trauma-informed approaches.
- Greater understanding of neurodivergence and masking.
- Better joined-up working between services.
- Clearer pathways and responsibilities.

This should include professionals across:

- Schools
- Alternative Provision
- Foster services
- Social Care
- Mental Health teams
- Attendance services
- Educational Psychology
- Early Help
- Health services

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This should include professionals across:

- | | | | |
|--|--|---|---|
| 
Schools | 
Alternative Provision | 
Foster services | 
Social Care |
| 
Mental Health teams | 
Attendance services | 
Educational Psychology | 
Early Help Health services |



When families and professionals are **SUPPORTED, UNDERSTOOD AND CONNECTED**, children and young people can feel safe, supported and able to thrive.



NEXT STEPS

Based on the feedback gathered, suggested next steps include (graphic to share with families is on the next page):

Develop Earlier Intervention Approaches

- Improve recognition of early signs.
- Strengthen support around transitions.
- Build earlier family support pathways.

Improve Professional Understanding

- Increase EBSA training across education and wider services.
- Develop understanding of masking, burnout and trauma.
- Promote neuro-affirming approaches.

Strengthen Collaboration

- Improve joined-up working between services.
- Develop clearer communication pathways.
- Reduce the need for families to repeatedly retell their story.

Focus on Emotional Safety

- Promote emotionally safe environments.
- Encourage relationship-based approaches.
- Reduce punitive attendance responses where distress is present.

Continue Co-Production

- Keep families and young people involved in future planning.
- Continue listening activities.
- Ensure lived experience shapes future EBSA developments.

As part of the next phase of this work, we will continue to share the themes and learning from families, young people and professionals across the local area. A series of accessible graphics and summaries based on the EBSA Journey framework (Appendices 1–3) will be shared through social media, newsletters, workshops and partner networks to help raise awareness and improve understanding of EBSA experiences.

Our Next Steps

A Roadmap for Change

“The right support, understanding and relationships can change the journey for children and families.”

- Listening 
- Understanding 
- Changing Lives 

Working together for better outcomes



1

Share What We've Heard

- ✓ Share findings with families, young people and professionals.
- ✓ Use accessible graphics and summaries on social media, newsletters & networks.



2

Strengthen Collaboration



- ✓ Continue conversations across education, health and social care.
- ✓ Build stronger partnerships and reduce gaps between services.

3

Improve Understanding & Practice

- ✓ Promote trauma-informed and neuro-affirming approaches.
- ✓ Provide training, resources and shared learning opportunities.



4

Act on Feedback

- ✓ Use what we've learned to influence policy, practice and service development.
- ✓ Continue to champion earlier intervention, emotional safety and compassionate support.



5

Co-produce the Future

- ✓ Create ongoing opportunities for families and professionals to share experiences.
- ✓ Work together to design practical solutions that make a real difference.



Our Shared Goal

A more understanding, supportive and compassionate system where children, young people and families can thrive.

Together, we can make change happen.



Listen



Understand



Collaborate



Support



Empower



Change Lives

FINAL REFLECTION

This report reflects the experiences shared by participants involved in the engagement activities and is not intended to represent every family's experience of EBSA. The feedback gathered shows that EBSA journeys are deeply personal, complex and emotionally significant for families.

While experiences varied, one message was consistent throughout:

Early understanding, compassion, flexibility and the right support can change outcomes for children and families.

Families repeatedly told us that relationships, trust and feeling heard matter more than any single intervention.

Every journey is different – but no family should have to go through it alone.

We hope this feedback supports continued reflection, collaboration and meaningful change across education, health and social care services.

APPENDIX 1- SUMMARY GRAPHIC



What We Heard About EBSA Journeys

Listening. Understanding. Changing.

This report summarises feedback from families, young people and professionals across education, health and social care about Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA).

Their experiences, insights and ideas will help shape better support, stronger collaboration and improved outcomes for children and families.



How We Heard From You



2

Face to Face Events

Two in-person events with parents, young people and professionals.



1

Online Event

One online event to enable wider participation and accessibility.



Lots of Text & Email Feedback

A large volume of additional feedback shared via text messages and email.



1

Questions Document

A structured set of questions mapped to the EBSA Journey to guide conversations.

Who We Heard From

We heard from families and professionals across education, health and social care.



Parent Carers

37



Young People

3



Professionals (including schools, AP provisions, foster teams, social care, health services and other support teams)

24



Every voice helps change the journey.

Your experiences and ideas are helping us build better support for children and families, and stronger partnership working across all services and teams.

Families consistently highlighted:



The importance of early intervention.

Spotting signs early and getting the right support sooner can prevent crisis.



The need for emotionally safe environments.

Children need to feel safe, understood and able to be themselves to thrive.



Better understanding of neurodivergence and trauma.

Looking beyond behaviour to understand underlying needs, experiences and strengths.



Strong relationships and collaborative working.

Trusted relationships and joined-up working across education, health and social care make the biggest difference.



Compassion over punishment.

Empathy, flexibility and understanding help children feel supported not sanctioned.

What We Heard Overall

- ✓ Early signs are often missed or minimised.
- ✓ Transitions can be a significant trigger.
- ✓ Families struggle to access the right support.
- ✓ Systems are complex and inconsistent.
- ✓ Small changes can have a huge impact.
- ✓ Everyone wants the same goal: the best outcomes for children and families.



What We Captured



Open conversations at face to face events



Interactive online session with polls and discussions



Ongoing feedback via text messages and email



Questions document based on the EBSA Journey



Encouraged honest, real experiences and ideas

The strongest message throughout all engagement activity was:

The right support, understanding and relationships can change the journey for children and families.



Thank You Everyone who shared their experiences, ideas and honest feedback. Your voices will help create a more understanding, supportive and compassionate system for all children, young people and families.

Together, we can change the journey.



APPENDIX 2- SUMMARY GRAPHIC OF JOURNEY FEEDBACK



The EBSA Journey: What We Heard at Each Stage ☹

Across our engagement, families and professionals shared what helps, what gets in the way, and what needs to change to improve outcomes for children and families.



1. Supporting Change

What we heard

- Transitions are stressful and often start anxiety early.
- One transition day is not enough.
- Lack of preparation and information.

What helps

- Early planning
- Multiple visits
- Visuals & transition packs
- Trusted staff & relationships



2. Early Signs / Noticing Differences

What we heard

- Physical symptoms (stomach aches, headaches, nausea).
- Emotional changes, masking, withdrawal.
- Friendship difficulties, bullying.
- Parents often knew before professionals.

What helps

- Listening to parents
- Early recognition
- Understanding autism, masking & trauma



3. Escalation / Distress Builds

What we heard

- Anxiety escalates, school becomes overwhelming.
- Punitive responses (detentions, demerits) worsen distress.
- Burnout, shutdown, increased absences.

What helps

- Emotional safety over attendance pressure
- Trauma-informed approaches
- Looking at underlying causes



4. Help-Seeking / Reaching Out

What we heard

- Hard to access support.
- Passed between services.
- Repeating our story many times.
- Not feeling listened to.

What helps

- Named contacts
- Good communication
- Professionals who listen without judgement



5. Crisis Point

What we heard

- Daily battles around attendance.
- Emotional exhaustion, family breakdown.
- Unable to leave the house.

What helps

- Immediate support
- Reduced pressure
- Safety-focused, understanding adults



6. Navigating the System

What we heard

- Systems are confusing and fragmented.
- Repetition and lack of joined-up working.
- Unclear pathways and responsibilities.

What helps

- Clear pathways
- Better communication between services
- Named key workers



7. Understanding the Need

What we heard

- Need to look beyond behaviour.
- EBSA linked to autism, ADHD, trauma, sensory needs, mental health.
- Parents felt blamed.

What helps

- Trauma-informed
- Neuro-affirming
- Listening to the child and family



8. Support & Adjustments

What we heard

- Small adjustments make a big difference.
- Trusted adults, flexibility and consistency are key.
- One size does not fit all.

What helps

- Flexible timetables
- Home visits, soft starts, calm spaces
- Collaborative plans



9. Recovery / Re-engagement

What we heard

- Recovery is slow, non-linear and individual.
- Pressure reduction and trust enable progress.
- Small steps matter.

What helps

- Small achievable steps
- Positive relationships
- Focus on strengths



10. Longer-Term Outcomes

What we heard

- Long-term impact on confidence, anxiety and education.
- Hope and positive change is possible.
- Right support transforms outcomes.

What helps

- Ongoing support
- Strong networks
- Planning for the future



Thank You

Everyone who shared their experiences, ideas and honest feedback. Your voices will help create a more understanding, supportive and compassionate system for all children, young people and families.

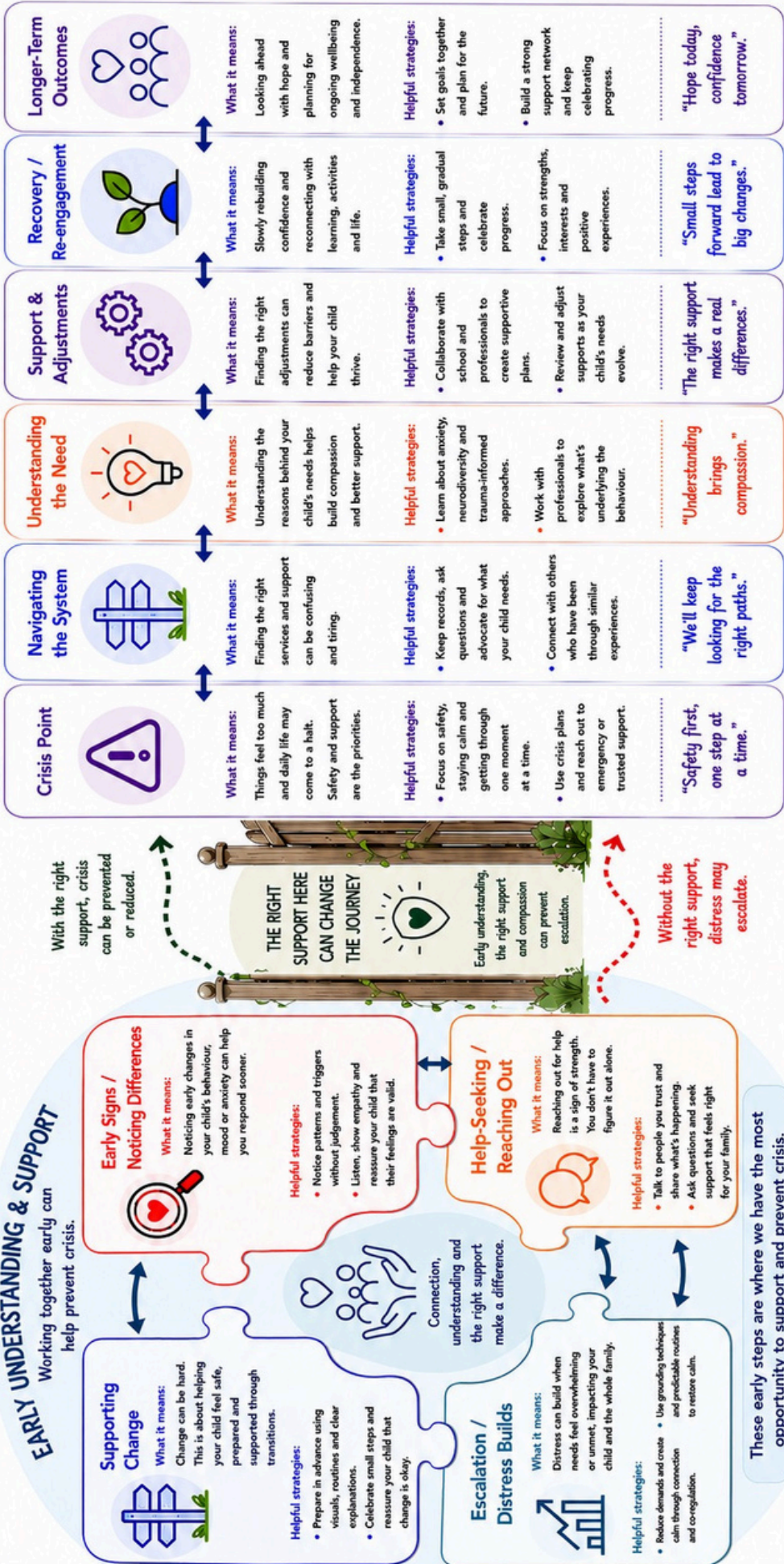
Together, we can change the journey.



APPENDIX 3- EBSA JOURNEY

The EBSA Journey

Every journey is different, but no family should have to go through it alone.



EBSA is a journey – not a moment. | Early understanding, the right support and compassion can change everything for our children and families.

APPENDIX 4 – DETAILED THEMES AND FEEDBACK MAPPED AGAINST THE EBSA JOURNEY

0. Supporting Change

What Families Told Us

Transitions and changes were frequently identified as early trigger points for anxiety and distress.

Families described:

- Difficulties moving between classes, year groups and schools.
- Primary to secondary transition causing significant anxiety.
- Children struggling with uncertainty and unfamiliar environments.
- Anxiety beginning months before transitions occurred.
- Lack of emotional preparation for change.

Common signs included:

- Stomach aches.
- Headaches and migraines.
- Increased emotional distress before school.
- Sleep difficulties.
- Exhaustion and overwhelm.

Families shared that:

- One transition day was not enough.
- Transition planning often started too late.
- Schools did not always listen to parent concerns about readiness.
- Children needed familiarity before transition.

Helpful Approaches Identified

- Earlier transition planning.
- Multiple visits.
- Visual supports and transition packs.
- Video tours.
- Meeting staff in advance.
- Consistency of communication.
- Known adults and trusted relationships.
- Home visits.
- Soft starts.
- Transition objects.

- Social stories.
- Increased support around Year 5/6 transition.

Key Themes

- Emotional readiness is as important as academic readiness.
- Transitions need to be gradual, relationship-based and flexible.
- Parents want to be involved early in planning.

1. Early Signs / Noticing Differences

What Families Told Us

Families often recognised concerns long before professionals did.

Common early signs included:

- Anxiety before school.
- Physical symptoms:
 - stomach aches,
 - headaches,
 - nausea,
 - panic,
 - exhaustion.
- Friendship difficulties.
- Bullying.
- Emotional masking.
- Withdrawal.
- Changes in mood or behaviour.
- Increased distress around routines and school attendance.

Several parents described children:

- Eating lunch alone or hiding in toilets.
- Becoming emotionally exhausted from masking.
- Showing distress more at home than school.

Families frequently said:

“We knew something wasn’t right.”

What Families Needed Earlier

- Earlier recognition from schools.
- Better understanding of autistic girls and masking.
- Staff understanding of trauma responses.
- Earlier intervention and support.
- Better communication.
- Someone to genuinely listen.

Key Themes

- Early signs were often minimised.
- Children frequently masked distress in school.
- Parents often felt dismissed at this stage.

2. Escalation / Distress Builds

What Families Told Us

As distress escalated, families described:

- Increased school avoidance.
- Emotional shutdown.
- Aggression or emotional outbursts.
- Burnout and exhaustion.
- Increasing absences.
- Distress linked to uniforms, sensory needs and social pressures.
- Escalation in physical symptoms.

Families described:

- Children hiding before school.
- Being unable to leave the house.
- Panic escalating around school attendance.
- School becoming associated with trauma.

Several families described:

- Detentions for anxiety-related lateness.
- Punishment for slow processing.
- D merits for lack of eye contact.
- Children being punished for distress-related behaviours.

What Would Have Helped

- Earlier intervention.
- Emotional safety over attendance pressure.
- Better communication.
- Trauma-informed approaches.
- Consistency in staff and expectations.
- Flexible responses.
- Schools looking at underlying causes rather than behaviour alone.

Key Themes

- Punitive approaches worsened distress.
- Attendance-focused systems often escalated EBSA.
- Emotional safety was often overlooked.

3. Help-Seeking / Reaching Out

What Families Told Us

Families often described long and exhausting journeys trying to access support.

Many experienced:

- Being passed between services.
- Repeating their story multiple times.
- Lack of clarity around pathways.
- Professionals disagreeing over responsibility.
- Delayed responses.

Families accessed support through:

- Schools.
- SENCOs.
- CAMHS.
- GPs.
- MHST.
- Family support.
- Alternative provision.
- Educational psychology.
- Social care.
- Early Help.

However many said:

- They did not feel listened to.
- Communication was inconsistent.
- There was little joined-up working.
- Families had to seek information themselves.

What Worked Well

- Named trusted adults.
- Collaborative communication.
- Home visits.
- Open and honest relationships.
- Professionals who listened without judgement.
- Supportive school staff.

Key Themes

- Families valued relationships over systems.
- Communication breakdowns caused major stress.
- Parents often became the coordinator of support themselves.

4. Crisis Point

What Families Told Us

Families described crisis points as:

- Daily battles around attendance.
- Emotional exhaustion.
- Children unable to leave the house.
- Significant family stress and breakdown.
- Mental health deterioration.
- Isolation.
- Loss of routines and normal family life.

Some families described:

- Self-harm linked to school distress.
- Complete school refusal.
- Loss of friendships and social isolation.
- Parents reducing or leaving work.

Families frequently described: “Survival mode.”

What Was Needed

- Immediate emotional support.
- Crisis support for families.
- Reduced pressure.
- Safety-focused approaches.
- Professionals who understood EBSA.
- Faster access to help.

Key Themes

- Support often came too late.
- Families frequently reached breaking point before being heard.
- Crisis affected the entire family system.

5. Navigating the System

What Families Told Us

Families described systems as:

- Confusing.
- Fragmented.
- Difficult to navigate.
- Emotionally exhausting.

Many described:

- Repeating information multiple times.
- Lack of joined-up communication.
- Being passed between services.
- Unclear thresholds and pathways.
- Professionals not sharing information internally.

Families also highlighted:

- Lack of understanding of EBSA.
- Parent blaming.
- Feeling judged.
- Services “ping-ponging” families between teams.

What Would Improve Systems

- Named contacts/key workers.
- Better communication between services.
- Clear pathways and responsibilities.
- Reduced need to repeat stories.
- Earlier signposting.
- Better collaboration between education, health and social care.

Key Themes

- Families often felt alone navigating systems.
- Communication and consistency were major concerns.
- Parents valued professionals who showed empathy and compassion.

6. Understanding the Need

What Families Told Us

Families said understanding improved when professionals:

- Looked beyond behaviour.
- Considered neurodivergence and trauma.
- Recognised burnout and masking.
- Explored underlying causes.

Many parents described:

- Feeling blamed before needs were understood.
- Schools misunderstanding anxiety as defiance.
- EBSA being linked to:
 - Autism,
 - ADHD,
 - trauma,
 - sensory needs,
 - mental health difficulties.

Families stressed: “EBSA is not just school refusal.”

What Helped Understanding

- Trauma-informed approaches.
- Neuro-affirming approaches.
- Listening to the child.
- Recognising burnout.
- Parent expertise being valued.

Key Themes

- Understanding brought compassion.
- Families wanted professionals to move from viewing behaviours as “won’t” to understanding them as “can’t”.
- Parents frequently became the experts in their child’s needs.

7. Support & Adjustments

What Families Told Us

Helpful support included:

- Trusted adults.
- Flexible timetables.
- Home visits.
- Soft starts.
- ELSA support.
- Calm spaces.
- Mentoring.
- Alternative provision.
- Visual supports.
- Reduced sensory demands.
- Transition support.
- Emotional check-ins.
- Flexible attendance approaches.

Families valued:

- Staff knowing their child as a person.
- Quick responses to concerns.
- Collaborative problem-solving.

What Didn’t Work

- Punitive approaches.
- Lack of consistency.
- Poor communication.
- “One size fits all” responses.
- Attendance pressure without emotional support.

Key Themes

- Small adjustments made a big difference.
- Relationships mattered more than policies.
- Flexibility and consistency were highly valued.

8. Recovery / Re-engagement

What Families Told Us

Recovery was described as:

- Slow.
- Non-linear.
- Emotionally exhausting.
- Dependent on trust and relationships

Families said progress happened when:

- Pressure reduced.
- Children felt emotionally safe.
- Schools focused on strengths.
- Adults listened and believed children.
- Re-engagement happened gradually.

Helpful approaches included:

- Small achievable steps.
- Flexible attendance.
- Safe spaces.
- Trusted adults.
- Positive reinforcement.
- Relationship-based support.

Key Themes

- Recovery takes time.
- Burnout recovery is important.
- Progress should not be measured solely through attendance.

9. Longer-Term Outcomes

What Families Told Us

Long-term impacts included:

- Ongoing anxiety.
- Reduced confidence.
- Isolation.
- Educational disruption.
- Family breakdown.
- Financial pressures.
- Lasting trauma linked to school experiences.

However families also described:

- Hope.
- Increased understanding.
- Better outcomes when support improved.
- Young people slowly rebuilding confidence.

Many parents said:

- The right school environment transformed outcomes.
- Feeling listened to changed everything.

Advice Families Shared

- Be kind to yourself.
- Keep listening to your child.
- Small steps matter.
- Relationships matter.
- You are not alone.