

Supporting Pupils with Barriers to School Engagement and/or Attendance (BtSEA) Policy

Policy Statement

Our school is committed to ensuring that every child and young person feels safe, supported, and able to engage fully in education. We recognize that some pupils experience complex challenges that affect their ability to attend or engage with school. These challenges, referred to as Barriers to School Engagement and/or Attendance (BtSEA), require a compassionate, individualized, and collaborative approach.

This policy sets out our framework for identifying, understanding, and addressing BtSEA - ensuring that pupils receive timely and appropriate support.

Definition and Principles

BtSEA refers to reduced engagement or attendance due to factors impacting a child's physical, emotional, or mental wellbeing. It is usually a case of 'Can't', not 'Won't' - pupils are not choosing to disengage; they are unable to cope with school demands.

Underlying principles:

- A sense of belonging and positive relationships underpin success.
- Every pupil's situation is unique; responses must be personalized.
- Early identification and intervention prevent escalation.
- Collaboration between school, family, and external agencies is essential.
- Language matters: BtSEA reflects complexity better than 'school refusal' or 'EBSA'.

Early Identification

Staff should be alert to early signs of BtSEA, which may include:

- Frequent complaints of illness (e.g., headaches, stomach aches) on school days.
- Increased anxiety or distress before certain lessons or days.
- Requests for time in nurture spaces or quiet areas.
- Dysregulated behaviour or withdrawal during lessons.
- Masking in school but showing distress at home.

We recognise that behaviour is often communication. Patterns of absence or emotional distress should trigger curiosity and discussion, not assumptions.

Roles and Responsibilities

- Class Teachers: Notice changes, listen to pupils, communicate concerns promptly.
- Admin in Partnership with HT: Monitor attendance data, flag patterns early.
- SENDCo/Pastoral Lead: Coordinate support plans, liaise with families and external agencies.
- Senior Leadership Team: Ensure policy implementation and resource allocation.
- Parents/Carers: Share observations and collaborate on solutions.
- Pupil Voice: Central to planning and decision-making (e.g. push /pull factors, feelings and emotions)

Assessment and Information Gathering

When BtSEA is suspected:

- Gather a 360° view: pupil voice (ensure the child is heard – their thoughts and feelings where these can be expressed), parent/carer input, school observations.
- Consider home, school, and community factors.
- Avoid judgment; use curiosity and openness.
- Document findings and agree next steps collaboratively.

The CARE Perspective

Our approach to BtSEA is rooted in the following perspective:

- Communication: Open, honest dialogue with families and pupil; timely referrals.
- Adjustments: Individualized strategies (e.g., sensory breaks, lunch passes, uniform flexibility) based on reasonable adjustments.
- Relationships: Build trust through nurturing practices and support.
- Environment: make efforts to reduce sensory overload; provide safe spaces; scaffold or reduce transitions.

Support Framework

We adopt the i-Thrive model, offering graduated support based on need:

Universal Level:

- Promote mental health and wellbeing for all.
- Review policies for inclusivity (e.g., attendance rewards, uniform) and allow flexibility where possible
- Foster a nurturing culture where pupils feel safe to share concerns.
- Implement anti-bullying strategies and do all we can to ensure pupils feel safe.

Targeted Level:

- Identify a trusted adult/key worker for the pupil (note, this person may not be available at all times)
- Agree reasonable adjustments (e.g., flexible start times, time-out passes, quiet spaces).
- Communicate adjustments to all staff and apply consistently.
- Produce a Support Plan with input from pupil and family.
- Review regularly and adapt as needed.

Specialist Level:

- Seek external support (e.g., CAMHS, Early Help, SENDIASS).
- Consider trauma-informed approaches.

Recognised Limitations and Language

We recognise that BtSEA is a particularly emotional subject for parents, especially when it is associated with crises at home, seeing their child distressed, or difficult separations and transitions.

Masking and Language

We also recognise that a child can appear 'fine' in school, but they may be masking some deeper anxiety. This is particularly the case for children with autism. Once we have established that a child frequently masks and this has been acknowledged, teachers may still use shorthand phrases for communication with parents – saying that a child is "doing well", "settled", "fine", "coping", "ok" etc. – is a way to share that they are not showing *visible* signs of distress, disengagement or anxiety. This is to provide parents with some reassurance and comfort.

Such phrases are not intended to convey that there is no issue, nor are they ignoring the fact that masking may be going on. Thus the implied caveat 'but we know they may be masking' can be added to such phrases without this needing to be said on every occasion – to facilitate quick communication about how a child is doing or how a day is going.

Separation from Parents

Parents have different views on how much intervention they would like to help a child separate from them. Some feel that a staff member gently physically separating their child from them (e.g. through taking their hand, stopping them clinging, or giving a hug etc.) is a welcome and helpful approach. Other parents may wish no physical contact to be given to their child at a time of separation. School will seek to work in partnership with parents. However, the following will not be a part of standard practice:

- Intensive physical restraint of child – e.g. holding them for prolonged periods of time to allow separation
- Carrying children into school regularly
- Getting children out of the car
- Intervening off-site
- Home visits to assist with separation
- Long 'negotiations' or 'persuading' pupils – this can be overwhelming and lead to more anxiety as the child feels they have multiple decisions to make

Wherever possible, the approach taken will focus on simple phrases, verbal and non-verbal cues, offers of support, then providing space for the child to process what has been offered.

Resources and Staffing

Whilst every effort will be made to ensure that familiar staff are available to support BtSEA children with transitions etc., school is a dynamic environment. As such, the same adult may not always be available, nor can teachers necessarily commit to being able to be on hand at difficult transition times due to wider class commitments etc.. Other staff (SLT, pastoral, admin etc.) may be called upon to provide support for BtSEA children, but every effort will be made to ensure that someone familiar to the child is involved.

It is also important to note that schools have limited resources; even children with additional funding cannot be guaranteed constant individual adult availability.

Adjustments made for children with BtSEA must be reasonable in the light of restricted resources, physical spaces and the ever-changing environment of a school.

In addition, there is strong evidence that being dependent on one particular strategy or person can be, in itself, problematic in addressing BtSEA – for instance if that adult is then off sick or unavailable, or if that one approach is somehow prevented due to circumstances beyond anyone's control. Over-reliance on an individual or a highly specific approach is unwise and can create longer term issues.

Missed Learning

It is clear that issues with attendance do impact academic performance. Every case of BtSEA is unique and the approach to missed learning will be adapted accordingly. Some pupils experience heightened anxiety due to being off ('I missed English today, so I can't face it tomorrow as I won't understand') – such children may benefit from work being sent home for them to engage with to help build their confidence for the next day. Other pupils would find work being sent home to be a pressure and this would cause further harm or overwhelm.

Where it is felt that a child would benefit from doing some extra learning at home, staff will follow the guidance of our 'Missed Learning Policy'.

Monitoring and Review

- Attendance and engagement data reviewed regularly.
- Support plans reviewed at least termly or sooner if needed.
- Policy effectiveness evaluated annually with input from staff, pupils, and parents.

External Support

- The Go-To (<https://thegoto.org.uk/>)
- Early Help Service
- Compass Phoenix & BUZZ Us
- Healthy Child Service
- CAMHS
- Alternative Provision and Medical Education Service

References

- Missed Learning Policy
- Child of the North Report (2024/25)
- DfE: Working Together to Improve School Attendance (2024)
- Parent Carer Voice North Yorkshire
- Educational Psychology Service Guidance