Plymouth Educational Psychology Service

Supportive practices for children experiencing school related distress - Guidance for schools

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1. Introduction and acknowledgement

1.1 The purpose of this guidance is to support schools in adopting effective, psychologically informed approaches for children experiencing school-related distress. The guidance promotes a graduated and responsive approach in which a universally supportive school ethos provides the foundation for reducing the likelihood and impact of school-related distress. It emphasises the importance of staff recognising and responding to emerging concerns at the earliest opportunity, whether these concerns are raised by the child, their family, or school staff.

Early identification and shared home-school understanding of a child's experiences increase the likelihood of timely and appropriate support. Prompt intervention can reduce the impact of factors that may maintain or intensify school-related distress over time.

Through collaborative working between the child, their family, school staff and relevant professionals, a shared understanding can be developed and a responsive support plan co-produced to meet the child's needs at that particular point in time.

1.2 This guidance has been developed by the Plymouth Educational Psychology Service and draws on a range of resources. We would particularly like to thank the families, school, health and local authority colleagues across Plymouth who generously contributed their time, experiences and expertise during the development of this guidance. Their feedback has been invaluable in shaping a document that reflects the needs and experiences of our local community.

The terms ‘child/ren’ will be used throughout this document to refer to any school-aged young person. The terms ‘families’ and ‘parents’ will be used interchangeably throughout this document to refer to any adults in a caring role in a child’s network outside of school.

2. What is school related distress?

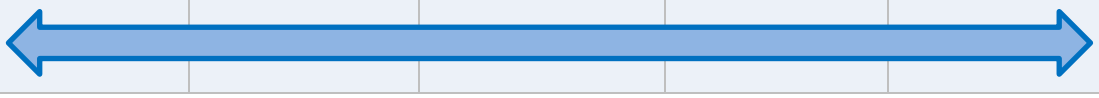
2.1 School-related distress occurs when attending, anticipating attending, or being in school results in emotional and/or physical distress that the child experiences as overwhelming. School-related distress exists along a continuum. At one end, a child may experience occasional feelings of discomfort or anxiety about school but can continue to engage successfully when appropriate support is available. Where concerns are not recognised or responded to in a way that is experienced as supportive by the child, these experiences may become more frequent, intense and enduring.

For some children, school-related distress develops gradually and becomes normalised as part of their day-to-day experience. As a result, difficulties may not be identified until attendance, participation or engagement begin to decline. For others, a single event or significant change may trigger a sudden reduction in their capacity to cope within the school environment.

It is important that schools provide support across the full spectrum of school-related distress rather than waiting until attendance difficulties become significant or descriptors such as *Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA)* or *Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA)* are being considered. Subtle behaviour changes, that are not typical for that child's presentation, are important to notice and be curious about.

Movement along this continuum reflects the child's current level of distress and capacity to cope within their environment. It should not be interpreted as a lack of motivation, unwillingness to attend school, or a lack of value placed on education. Children experiencing school-related distress frequently want to attend school but find doing so increasingly difficult due to the emotional demands associated with the school environment. It can feel to the child and their family that they cannot share or have their voice heard and listened to. This child voice video highlights the importance of recognising the problem is the distress, not the child or the school: School is not my enemy

Figure 2.1: Spectrum of school-related distress

Emerging or intermittent school-related distress	Persistent school-related distress	Distress-driven school-related behaviours	Generalised distress response	Overwhelmed distress response
Anxiety-linked physical symptoms and/or thoughts linked to school Often able to suppress behavioural responses to emotional and physical experiences (mask) in school. Home may notice distress before school notice.	Ongoing anxiety experiences linked to going to or being in school Attendance and school behaviour may change	Reduced capacity to tolerate school environment Generalised challenges with coping in school so attendance will be impacted	Reduced capacity to tolerate world beyond school Behavioural changes with participation with activities and interactions beyond school	Reduced capacity to engage with own safe world (typically at home) Limited participation with activities in their own environment with trusted people
				

3. Supportive school ethos

3.1 **Whole school strategic review**

All Plymouth schools should have clear guidance that outlines staff roles, responsibilities and procedures for responding to concerns about school-related distress. This is likely to be part of their whole school inclusion strategy.

When developing or reviewing this guidance, senior leaders, governors and trust leaders should consider:

- How inclusive and psychologically safe their school is for all learners.
- The experiences of belonging, participation and inclusion reported by pupils and parents.
- Whether current policies and practices align with evidence-informed approaches.
- How school systems and environments may unintentionally create barriers for some learners.
- How schools communicate and work with parents.

Elpida Ahtaridou's research (2026) into factors influencing school attendance in Plymouth provides a valuable starting point for these discussions School Improvement Research | Plymouth Marjon University. Views shared by 1103 families in 2026 with Sunshine Support is similarly a valuable starting point for these discussions School Avoidance Research 2026 | Sunshine Support.

Educational Psychologists can support schools through consultation, facilitated reflection sessions, whole-school audits and signposting to specific audit and screening tools that schools may wish to consider using to review current systems, practices and provision in relation to school-related distress.

3.2 **Communication with parents**

Parent experiences research, such as Onslow, J. & Cartmell (2025), highlight the importance of effective two-way parental and school communication and if problems are experienced by parents with communication with school this can have a hugely

detrimental impact on supportive practices for the child involved. Strelitz, Barrett et al, (2026) review of internationally published research on what is most effective for supporting attendance found positive engagement and communication between parents and schools was most likely to be beneficial, more than any particular strategy or intervention approach. Within each school's guidance there should be a summary of the school's communication pathway for parents who want to initiate conversations about their child's experiences of school related distress, current or previous, and how parents can expect the school to initiate if they have concerns about experiences of school related distress.

Considerations about how to communicate with accessible formats, such as a single page flowchart should be included, and how to share this information with parents as part of informed transition planning, as many children with previous experiences of school related distress can benefit from a proactive enhanced transition plan. Information could helpfully be provided on school websites about how parents can support conversations at home and the pathway for parents to communicate these conversations with the school. Quick effective communication between parents and schools can help school related distress feel contained by the child and their family.

3.3 **Impact on neurodivergent learners**

School-related distress disproportionately impacts neurodivergent learners, especially autistic learners (Connolly et al., 2023). Schools should therefore critically reflect on the lived experiences of neurodivergent pupils and consider whether their policies, environments and practices are genuinely neuroaffirming. A neuroaffirming approach recognises and values neurodiversity. It seeks to understand behaviour within the context of a child's experiences and needs, focuses on reducing barriers to participation, and promotes environments that enable children to feel safe, understood and accepted.

Schools may find the *National Guidance for Best Practice in Inclusive Education for Autistic Students* (Autism CRC, 2026) National Guidance for best practice in inclusive education for autistic students | Autism CRC; Pete Wharmby's podcast How schools can help their autistic learners and Dr Pooky Knightsmith's Neuroaffirming schools are helpful resources when reviewing their provision.

3.4 **Commitment to ensuring supportive ethos from entire staff team**

Schools should provide ongoing professional development that enables staff to:

- Understand school-related distress and its potential causes.
- Develop confidence in recognising early signs of distress.
- Apply psychologically informed and relational approaches.
- Understand trauma-informed and neuroaffirming practice.
- Use supportive language when discussing anxiety and emotional wellbeing.
- Collaborate effectively with children, families and professionals when developing support plans.
- Facilitate discussions and an ethos for all pupils to be aware of and supportive of individual differences to be inclusive of each other.

Ongoing training areas include:

- Psychological models of anxiety, including separation anxiety and school-related distress.
- Psychoeducational approaches to understanding and managing anxiety.
- Trauma-informed and relational approaches.
- Neurodiversity and neuroaffirming practice, including the increased risk of and needs associated with experiencing burnout.
- Belonging, inclusion and connectedness for pupils and staff.
- Solution-focused and collaborative planning approaches.

Schools should also establish opportunities for reflective supervision, peer consultation and problem-solving discussions to ensure staff feel supported in their work with children experiencing school-related distress. Both bespoke training and models for setting up peer supervision in schools can be discussed with link Educational Psychologists.

4. Supporting an individual: early, responsive and accurate identification of concerns

4.1 Whole school guidance should clearly outline the pathway for responding to concerns about school related distress and identify who is responsible for leading this shared process. Schools should respond promptly whenever concerns are raised by a child, family member or member of staff. Emerging signs of distress should not be minimised. This may include information about previous distress such as at a former school and planning for enhanced transition can increase the likelihood of effective settling into a new school. The longer difficulties persist, the greater the risk that additional maintaining factors may develop, making reintegration and recovery more challenging.

Whilst concerns should be taken seriously, it is equally important to communicate that experiences of anxiety and school-related distress are common and that appropriate support can make a significant positive difference.

4.2 The first step should be identifying a key school adult who is best placed to have relational conversations with the child, the family and with staff who know the child well. The aim is to gather relevant perspectives from all involved quickly, sensitively with non-shaming language and collaboratively to develop a shared understanding of the child's experiences. Gathering the child's voice with more than one person and in different environments can help explore their perspectives in more detail so school may wish to share resources with home so the child can complete some at home and some in school, for example.

Examples include:

- Structured assessment tools that can be used with children, families and school staff such as the ATTEND Framework, the Trafford Early Identification of Needs Tool or Lisa Cherry's Belonging Mattering Audit Tool;
- Child voice approaches that use visual and concrete methods to support participation and reduce expectation for verbal explanations, such as: -

School wellbeing measure like School Wellbeing Cards;

Questionnaires and scales, like Goodenow, C. (1993) Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale PSSM Scale

Mapping activities that explore perceptions of safety, belonging and sensory experiences across the school environment.

These tools can also provide useful baseline information for future reviews.

4.3 As part of gathering views, the identified member of staff will explain with the child, their family and relevant school staff what the school process is for providing support, such as starting with an in-school plan-do-review approach, and what the next steps will be if reviews identify that further support is needed. Schools should offer a paper or emailed copy of their in-school plan-do-review timeframe approach that can be shared with everyone involved. An initial child, family and school action planning meeting should be arranged as quickly as feasibly possible, ideally not more than a week after the initial concern was raised.

5. Supporting an individual: co-creating a responsive plan

5.1 When the lead school adult has gathered views from each perspective, they will need to organise how to co-produce an action plan with the child and their family (and any relevant professional in their network, including any other adults in school identified as protective factors) so that everyone can experience this as a supportive collaborative approach. Prior to meeting, they should discuss, as developmentally appropriate, how the child wishes to be involved in creating the plan and discuss this with the family to ensure everyone can participate positively. A blank copy of the school action plan template should be shared with the parents prior to the meeting.

5.2 At the meeting, an action plan will be created using a school template specific for school related distress (example template in appendix), which will include:

- the risk factors identified that link to the child, their family and their school, both historic and current factors;
- the protective factors that might be helpful to utilise to support the child;
- a written summary of the shared understanding in the meeting of why school related distress is happening now and so what next steps seem appropriate to consider;
- specific adjustments, strategies or interventions the child, their family and school wish to trial. It should be written on the plan who is doing what, when this will happen and how it will happen. It should also be written on the plan how effectiveness monitoring information of each adjustment, strategy or intervention will be collected and who in school will do this in the week before the review meeting;
- if a part-time timetable is identified as a support that may be helpful then Plymouth City Council part-time timetable guidance should be shared with the family with a clear rationale of why the reduction at particular times may be supportive and clearly explained to the child and family of when this will be reviewed so that any changes to their timetable only happen in the way that they expect it to help manage triggering anxiety. This needs to be maintained even if success is experienced so that the child experiences changes as predictable and safe;
- if accessing support through an alternative provider (AP) is identified as possibly helpful then a shared rationale of why this is more appropriate to happen with an AP rather than in school support should be written down. This should include a written plan of

what outcomes the AP is being asked to support with, for how long and how the effectiveness of this support will be measured, by whom and when so that this can be shared with the child and their family as well as with the action plan in the request to the AP for their support.

- Dates, times and people needed to attend a review meeting should be planned for no later than six weeks of a plan-do-review cycle. If the initial action plan involves (re-) integration changes within a six week time period as long as the child reports and their engagement indicates that the plan is effective then a wider review between school and home may not be needed sooner, but agreeing communication between home and school to discuss any concerns needs to be written into the action plan so that meeting together to review sooner can be implemented as quickly as it is identified as needed;
- At the end of the meeting a copy of the action plan will be shared with parents and all identified school staff and everyone encouraged to keep notes about the impact of the action plan ready for discussion at the review meeting.

6. Supporting an individual: collaborative reviews and adaptations

6.1 Prior to a review meeting the identified link adult in school will attempt to talk with the child, their family and relevant school staff involved in the action plan to gather views about the effectiveness of the initial action plan so they are prepared ahead of the review meeting about what needs to be discussed in the review.

6.2 At the first review, share child's voice and family and school perspectives about what in the plan is helping the child. When reduction in school related distress is noted by children, families and schools, planning meetings need to continue and consider how this progress is maintained. Attention needs to be paid to possibilities such as autistic or neurodivergent burnout where progress is likely to be temporary without lasting systemic change and adapted environments (see section 3). Any decision to cease further review meetings needs the agreement of all parties and a clear mechanism for restart in the case of future distress.

6.3 If the review identifies that experiences of school-related distress are not improving with the current action plan, then the review should include a discussion about which external agencies could be appropriate to seek involvement from. For example, involvement from Educational Psychology, Early Help, Attendance and Inclusion, Speech and Language Therapy, CAMHS, an alternative provider. Input from any external agencies should be discussed at review meetings to help inform amendments to the action plan.

6.4 If a child already has an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) and the initial review identifies that experiences of school-related distress are not improving following the initial action plan, it is appropriate for the school to call an early/interim annual review and discuss with parents about inviting relevant professionals, including from 0-25 team who are responsible for the EHCP and provide parents with contact information about Parent Information Advice and Support Service (PIAS) in case they wish for their involvement as well.

6.5 An Education Health and Care needs assessment (EHCNA) request may be appropriate to discuss with a family and a child if the needs identified are presenting as

pervasive and ongoing as part of reviewing with the child, their family, their school, and relevant external professional(s) that the action plan has been appropriate and implemented as agreed for the needs identified. This may be because a blended-education approach (use of targeted school interventions as well as specialist interventions that may or may not be within school and are above and beyond the level of normally available provision) has been identified as the appropriate ongoing provision for the child to access education successfully. The action plan and review documents should be included as evidence of the school-related distress and response to reduce this when an EHCNA is requested.

6.6 A section 19 request to Plymouth City Council may also be appropriate to discuss with a family and child at a review meeting to ask for education provision that the school cannot provide. Examples of when section 19 support may be helpful for children experiencing school related distress include:

- if there is a specific intervention that cannot be accessed directly by school or through the providers they use for alternative provision, but the child would like to engage with this intervention as part of their reintegration plan to their mainstream school, such as psycho-education work linked to current experiences of school-related distress so would prefer to work with a professional not linked to school;
- whilst awaiting EHCNA assessment, the child feels unable to engage directly with any offer from school they are on role at or feels unable to transfer to another mainstream secondary school;
- the incident of school-related distress is in the last year of their planned time at that school, e.g. Year 6 and Year 11 typically, and identified as linked to experiences in that year, such as exam distress or bullying incidents, so external intervention support can provide a bridge across the transition into their next education setting.

6.7 If experiences of school-related distress persist then the action plan review meetings will be ongoing between the child (participating as they feel able to), the family, the school and any external professionals involved so that there continues to be options discussed and trialled to support a child engage with an education offer. Each new review date needs to be set at the current review and the length of time between reviews needs to be decided based on time needed to identify the potential impact of

the adaptations agreed in the current review but should not be more than six weeks after the current review.

7. References

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8. Appendix: Example of a school action plan template

Risk factors
Including any: • significant previous life events including previous school distress experiences; • family, school, peer, racial, cultural, community stressors; • challenges linked to special educational needs and/or identity.

Protective factors
Including: • *Who are viewed as supportive figures at home, in school, with friendships and connections to clubs?* • *What has helped when experienced distress in school before or other environments?* • *What are the current interests, strengths and motivations of the child?* • *What are their goals they want to work towards and ideas to achieve this?* It can be helpful to take time to describe examples in detail shared from the child, the family and from school to give everyone opportunity to reflect on the wider story of the child. This can provide specific ideas for support in the current situation and help everyone understand what is important for the child for their future aspirations.

Shared current understanding
• Explanation of what has been identified as the triggers for the current school related distress experience; • Include if any maintenance factors identified e.g. changes in sleep pattern, onset of reduced tolerance to busy environments, comfortable with new habits at home, adults taking expert role or viewing child negatively now and child feeling pressure (including timeframe pressures made by adults), worries about getting behind with learning, loss of social network. • Include reasoning for why explanation suggests which next steps more likely to be helpful, e.g. why focusing on arrival, other transitions, environmental adaptations, providing regulation, social interaction or learning supports identified as priorities.

Next steps actions					
Action points	What	How	Who	When	How evidence of effectiveness will be gathered
1.					
2.					
3.	*Increase number of next steps actions as identified as needed.*				

First review date:	

To be completed at each review meeting

Does the child report that support is helping and any views they wish to be recorded:
• Reducing experiences of school-related distress? • Improving experiences of engagement and participation? • Increasing feelings of safety, belonging and inclusion? • Experiencing successes towards their own identified goals?

Action points	Evidence of effectiveness of action	Continue Y/N?	If Yes, define any adjustments needed (what, how, who, when)	If Yes, how evidence of effectiveness will be gathered
1.				
2.				

Any new actions identified					
Action points	What	How	Who	When	How evidence of effectiveness will be gathered
1.					
2.					
3.	*Increase number of next steps actions as identified as needed.*				

Are there new actions that are outside of the resources and provision the school can access themselves, such as requests for support from external agencies?
If yes define what actions agreed, for whom and when.

Next review date:	