



Awabakal Parai Acknowledgement
Saretta Fielding

[Saretta Art & Design - Contemporary Aboriginal Artworks](#)

Acknowledgement of Country

I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands on which I work and live: the Awabakal and Darkinjung Nations. I also pay respect to the wisdom of the Elders past and present and pay my respects to Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander peoples here today.

Not Just staying home:

Emotion Based School Avoidance - Case Formulation

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Why This Matters — A Personal and Professional Journey

“We need solid, evidence-informed ways of thinking about this problem— and practical tools that translate that thinking into action.”

Today you will leave with:

- A shared definition of EBSA
- A framework for identification
- Case formulation skills
- A free digital tool — the RTSK
- Two worked case studies
- Guidance for when progress stalls

What is Emotion Based School Avoidance?

Definition · key features · the stress-support equation

What are Emotion Based School Attendance Problems?

1

High level of
distress around
attending school

2

Chronic
Absenteeism

3

Not truanting
Parents are aware
of absences

"school refusal occurs when stress exceeds support, when risks are greater than resilience and when 'pull' factors that promote school non-attendance overcome the 'push' factors that encourage attendance"

(Thambirajah et al, 2008, p. 33).



anxiety, risk and stress factors > support and protective factors
=
vulnerable to school refusal



We are not just looking at the attendance data. We are looking for a pattern across domains — one that tells us why this young person, in this context, is struggling to attend.

Increasing absences

Often escalating term-by-term, possibly following a specific incident or transition point.

Present but not engaged

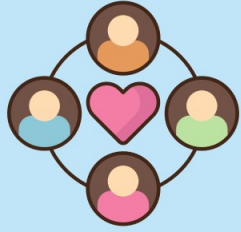
Frequent visits to sick bay, the front office, or the school counsellor during school time.

The Sunday deterioration

Fine on weekends, but anxiety and distress escalate as the school week approaches.

Visible distress

Meltdowns, physical symptoms, shutdown, or emotional dysregulation on school mornings — often followed by relief when the decision is made not to attend.



Prioritisation of well-being and support



Strong focus on learner as an individual



Values driven culture and clear educational philosophy

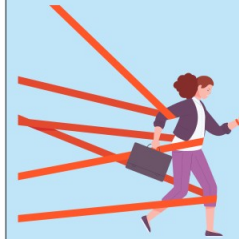
What WORKS in school?



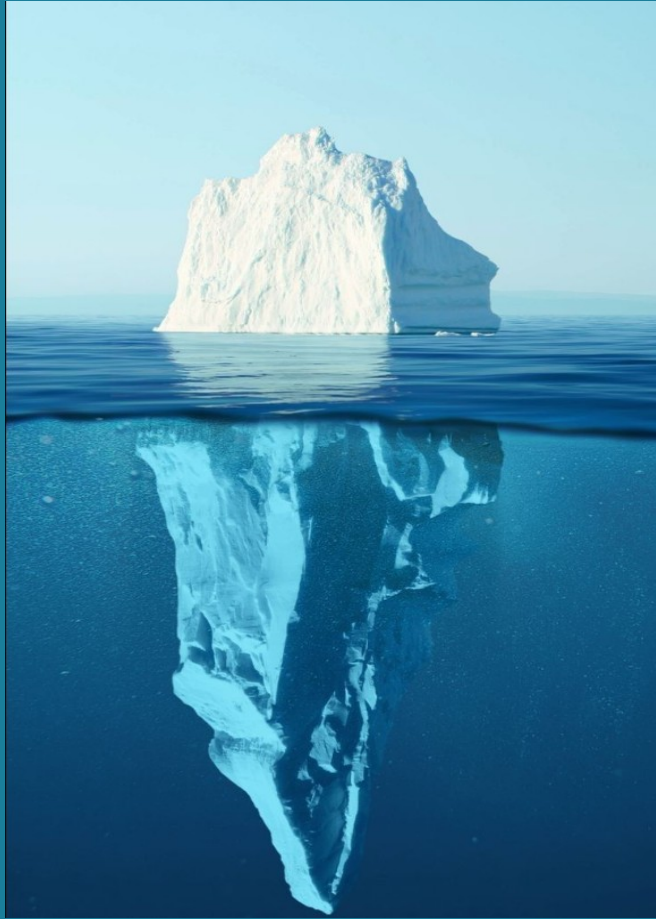
Working collaboratively across disciplines and settings



Flexible Education Pathways and Delivery



Addressing Barriers to Engagement



**Solving EBSA
problems
is an inclusive
education
issue.**



Case Formulation

What it is · why it matters · the KiTeS framework



From Description to Explanation — What Is a Case Formulation?

Assessment / Description — WHAT

"Marcus has had 42 days absence this term. He presents with anxiety symptoms and is behind in Mathematics."

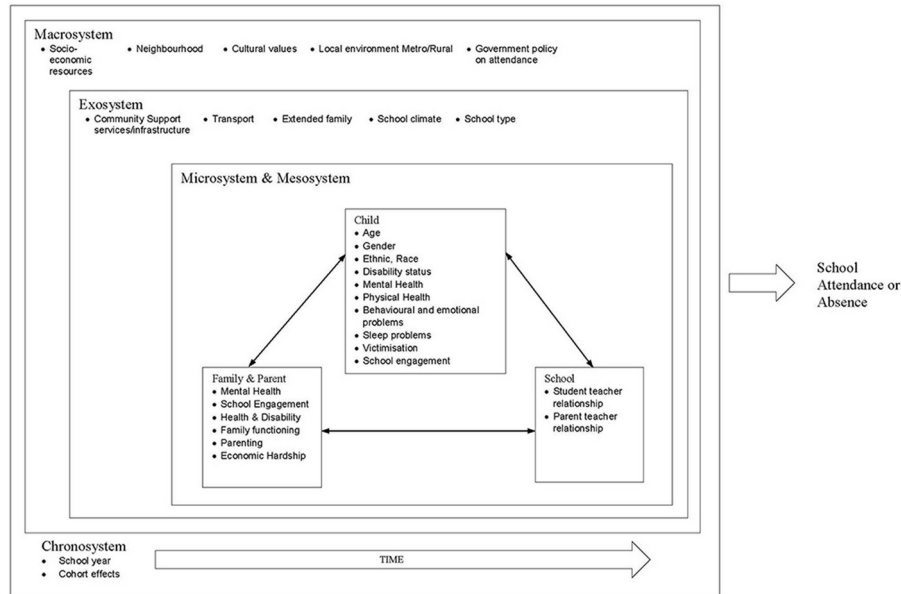


Case Formulation — WHY

"Marcus's avoidance is maintained by social evaluation anxiety, amplified by sensory sensitivity to the playground, and reinforced by shame about missing assessment tasks and being behind with school work."

A case formulation is a working theory about why this is happening for this young person in this context. It is not a final answer — it is a hypothesis that shapes action.

Kids and Teens at School (KiTeS) — A Bioecological Systems Approach



The student is embedded in systems

Biology, psychology, family, school, and society all interact. We cannot understand EBSA without understanding context.

The school is a variable

The school environment is not just the backdrop — it is an active part of the formulation. Ask: what is the school contributing?

Multiple intervention points

Because EBSA is systemic, there are multiple places to intervene — not only with the individual student.



If there's something about the school environment that would make it genuinely difficult for anyone with this student's profile to attend, changing or modifying the environment will be part of the intervention.

Mentalising in Case Formulation



Mentalising is the capacity to understand behaviour — our own and others' — in terms of underlying mental states such as thoughts, feelings, intentions and needs (Allen, Fonagy & Bateman, 2008).

Co-created, not delivered

Offered by the young person and family — establishing joint attention and a shared understanding rather than handing down a verdict (Bateman & Fonagy).

Held provisionally

Offered as one perspective, openly marked and revisable. Holding the formulation lightly keeps the process itself a mentalising act.

Builds epistemic trust

Feeling accurately understood lowers epistemic mistrust and opens the young person to learning and change (Fonagy & Allison).

In AMBIT, mentalising is the organising framework — extended from the clinical relationship to teams and multi-agency networks (Bevington, Fuggle, Cracknell & Fonagy, 2017).



Key Considerations for EBSA Case Formulation

Biological · Psychological · Social · Systemic

Presenting Predisposing Precipitating Perpetuating Protective



Case Formulation



Biological

- Neurodiversity
- Somatic Symptoms
- Sensory issues
- Nervous system issues
- Physical conditions
- Academic Ability
- Cognitive Challenges
- Gender



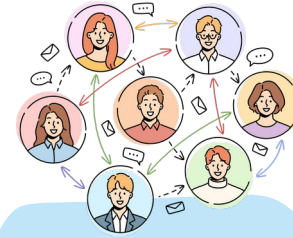
Psychological

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Personality
- Emotional Regulation
- Coping Skills
- Functional behaviour
- Burn out



Social

- Supports
- Socio-economic
- Peer relationships
- Teacher connections
- School Alienation



Systemic

- Basic Needs
- School Factors
- Curriculum
- Inclusivity



Biocological Model

Sees problems in context of other factors and systems in young person's life and acknowledges interaction between systems

Presenting Problem: Observable difficulty with attending school accompanied by emotional distress.

Predisposing - why is this young person more likely to experience EBSA than their peers? What has made them vulnerable to this particular behaviour?

Precipitating - what triggered the issue at this moment in time? Was there an internal or external “event” that made things worse? Maybe it is a cluster of events that when combined tipped the young person into overwhelm.

Perpetuating - what is preventing the young person from moving through this difficulty? Are there barriers that we are not aware of?

Protective - what helps the young person re-engage with education and feel good about doing so? These can be external or internal strength based factors.

Understanding student perspective

The young person is our most important source of information. Because their perspective is so often masked by avoidance and distress, intervention must be created **with** them, not just **for** them.

Helpful resources to elicit student perspectives:

[Landscape-of-Fear-Primary.pdf](#)

[Picture Cards for EBSA](#)

[My School Experience - AMAZE Resource](#)

[Reconnect to School Kit \(RTSK\) — School Refusal Assessment & Intervention Guide](#)

Reconnect to School Kit

A free case formulation and intervention planning tool for school counsellors

1

Case management

Open, save, and manage student case files. All data stays on your device.

2

The questionnaire

Select relevant indicators. Conditional questions appear automatically as needed.

3

Evidence Informed Suggestions

The report generates evidence informed strategies and links to helpful resources and questionnaires that can be used with schools, parents and young people.

4

Customise

Deselect strategies that don't fit. You are the clinician — the tool supports your judgement.

5

Export

Export as Word or PDF. Ready for case notes, consultations, or parent meetings.



Case Studies

Seeing the formulation in action





Case Study 1 — Alex - Year 8, 14 Years Old

Presenting concern:

Alex is fourteen and has had increasing absences over the past term. They are currently at 60% attendance, which is down from attendance in Year 7 – 82%. Parents report stomach aches or headaches on most school mornings. Spends significant time in sick bay when present.

Biological

- Somatic symptoms (stomach aches, headaches)
- Possible sensory sensitivity — avoids canteen, struggles in noisy assemblies
- No formal diagnosis but family history of endometriosis and migraines

Psychological

- High social evaluation anxiety
- "Scared of saying the wrong thing"
- Avoids being called on in class
- Avoidance is the primary coping tool — limited alternatives
- Insightful into own difficulties

Social

- Superficial peer relationships
- Doesn't quite fit in friendship group – is tolerated but not invited to outside school events
- One supportive teacher
- Strong family support

Systemic

- Rigid attendance policy contributing to shame
- Catch-up support for missed learning is poor
- School pressure on attendance – punishment for non attendance

Predisposing – temperament, possibly ND, Social anxiety **Precipitating** – somatic symptoms, uncomfortable social experiences at school **Perpetuating** – maintained by their absences as they miss out on important social opportunities. Somatic symptoms require further medical evaluation to rule out chronic conditions. The school's response — pressure without support — is

INDIVIDUAL CONCERNS

1. Anxiety

School-day symptoms; fear of judgement; assessment stress

- **Graded return:** Co-design a step-by-step plan with Alex, starting with low-demand, interest-based parts of the day and building up.
- **Regulation skills:** Teach breathing and grounding strategies, agree a break signal, and identify a safe space for overwhelming moments.
- **Safe person:** Daily low-pressure check-in with a trusted staff member.
- **Reduce known triggers:** Presentation pass or alternative formats; quieter routes and timing for transitions.

2. Health problems

Headaches and stomach aches, mainly school mornings

- **Track symptoms:** Daily log to map timing and triggers; distinguish anticipatory anxiety from situational stress.
- **Symptom toolkit:** Relaxation, breathing (4-7-8), heat/cold packs, hydration — usable at home and at school.
- **Rule out medical causes:** Family to arrange GP review; coordinate findings with the school plan.
- **Morning routine:** Sleep hygiene and consistent wake-up supports, with family leading at home.

3. Social isolation

Peer concerns; fear of negative evaluation

- **Listen first:** Validate Alex's peer concerns without judgement before problem-solving.
- **Structured connection:** Small-group or interest-based activity to rebuild peer contact at low stakes.
- **Safe breaks:** Quiet alternative space at recess/lunch initially, with gradual reintroduction to peer settings.
- **Gradual exposure:** Build up social situations from low-stakes interactions as confidence grows.

SYSTEMIC AND EXTERNAL CONCERNS

4. Shaming for non-attendance

School culture and staff responses

- **Staff awareness session:** Frame EBSA as anxiety-driven, not wilful; agree a consistent, informed approach.
- **Welcome back script:** Staff greet returns warmly with no comment on absence; no public attention to attendance
- **Review follow-up practices:** Ensure attendance communication with Alex and family is supportive, not punitive

5. No opportunity to catch up

Academic backlog adding pressure to return

- **Prioritise and reduce:** Negotiate a trimmed workload with teachers — essential tasks only during reintegration.
- **Break tasks down:** Smaller steps with adjusted deadlines; planner or checklist support.
- **Name catch-up support:** Identify specific catch-up time and a contact (learning support / tutorial) so the path back is visible
- **No penalty:** Make explicit to Alex that missed work won't be penalised while the plan is in place

Enablers and review: Daily home-school communication protocol with family • Plan shared with Alex before implementation and checked against their perspective • Fortnightly review of attendance, anxiety and symptom data, with the plan adjusted to Alex's response

Case Study 2 — Amber - Year 5, 10 Years Old

Presenting concerns

Amber is Autistic and had good attendance in early primary where she attended a mainstream class. There has been a significant decline in attendance this past year, and she is struggling to attend more than 3 days per week. Extreme distress on school mornings. Shuts down and refuses to engage when at school which is impacting learning. Parent reports withdrawal from family and highly volatile behaviour after school days.

Biological

- Autistic — significant sensory sensitivities
- Above grade level in literacy and numeracy - FSIQ also in very high range.
- Puberty within last two years with recent menarche.

Psychological

- Exhaustion from masking and managing demands
- Global withdrawal — not situation-specific
- Severely impaired regulation during distress peaks
- Highly internalized at school but externalizing at home

Social

- One close friend — key protective factor
- Friend is now in a different class
- Trust with new teacher not yet established — a priority
- Social relationships increasing in complexity and communication moving to online

Systemic

- No quiet space or regulation break option
- PLSP not reviewed this year
- Environment not adapted to sensory or regulation needs
- The school is a significant stressor by design - very large classes and old/ temporary buildings

Predisposing - Autistic, gifted, high masking female
Precipitating - Friend put in different class, transition, significant drop off in support
Perpetuating - Hasn't been able to make new social connections, and often struggles to understand the unspoken communication which makes her feel lonely, out of sync with peers, also bothered by noise in classroom and lights which were replaced over

INDIVIDUAL CONCERNS

1. Autistic burnout

Exhaustion from masking; global withdrawal; capacity must be restored before return

2. Social isolation

One close friend now in a different class; finds unspoken peer cues hard; lonely and out of sync

3. Emotional dysregulation

Shuts down at school, volatile at home; severely impaired regulation at distress peaks

- **Recovery before return:** Treat this period as active recovery; frame reduced attendance as a legitimate temporary part of getting better — not falling behind.
- **Reduce masking:** Give explicit permission to drop the mask in safe contexts — stimming allowed, no pressure to perform engagement.
- **Track capacity:** Co-design a simple energy or 'battery' check-in so Amber can flag when she is running low before she crashes.
- **Protect restorative time:** Anchor daily downtime around her interests and strengths as a protected part of recovery, not a reward to be earned.
- **Protect the 1:1 friendship:** Her closest friend is her key protective factor — prioritise enabling deliberate contact time, even across classes.
- **No forced participation:** Allow her to be present without social performance; group work and presentations are not conditions of attendance.
- **Connect through interests:** Build any peer contact around a shared activity she enjoys rather than open-ended, unstructured socialising.
- **Validate the loneliness:** Name that being out of sync with peers is real and exhausting; feeling understood is itself protective.
- **Co-create a regulation plan:** With Amber and family, map her early warning signs, agreed safe exits, and what actually helps her recover.
- **Plan for decompression:** After-school volatility is the cost of masking all day — protect recovery time and avoid stacking demands onto the evening.
- **Non-verbal outlets:** Provide a journal or sketchbook for private, low-demand emotional expression.
- **Reduce shame:** Help her understand shutdowns and meltdowns as neurological stress responses, not bad behaviour or weakness.

SYSTEMIC AND EXTERNAL CONCERNS

4. Autistic burnout — environment & load

High-demand setting; gifted and bored; lapsed support; very large classes

- **Review the PLSP:** It has not been reviewed this year — update it now to reflect a burnout-informed, low-demand profile
- **Stage, low-demand return:** Avoid the highest-demand and highest-sensory parts of the day; let attendance be low capacity, not the calendar.
- **Fix the academic mismatch:** She is gifted, bored and burnt out — offer interesting, low-pressure engagement (depth, choice), not more volume of work.
- **Train and coordinate staff:** Brief all staff that burnout is chronic-stress-driven, not defiance; convene a support team and set a review date

5. Social isolation — social structures

Friend moved to a different class; friendships shifting online and growing in complexity

- **Revisit class placement:** Reuniting Amber with her close friend, or building structured shared time across classes, is potentially the highest-leverage change
- **Low-demand connection space:** Offer a quiet recess/lunch location (library, support room) where she can be with one trusted peer instead of the playground.
- **Buddy arrangement:** With consent, a trusted peer meets her at the gate or walks with her to class to lower the threshold of arrival.
- **Monitor social dynamics:** Watch for exclusion or bullying as friendships move online and respond promptly.

6. Emotional dysregulation — spaces & systems

No quiet space; new lighting and classroom noise; new teacher not yet trusted

- **Provide a regulation space:** There is currently no quiet or break option — establish an always-available calm space with an exit-card system.
- **Fix the sensory environment:** Audit and adjust her specific triggers — lighting filters or seating, noise-cancelling headphones for transitions, quieter routes and timing.
- **Embed de-escalation protocols:** Agree a crisis and de-escalation plan understood by every adult who works with her, so responses are consistent.
- **Build a home-school loop:** A daily logbook or email plus a safe person check-in, so school sees the full-day cost and home gets warning of hard days.

Enablers and review: Recovery of capacity comes before reintegration — no pressure-based or punitive return strategies • Update the lapsed PLSP and establish a quiet regulation space as first structural fixes • Plan shared with Amber before implementation and checked against her perspective • Monitor mood given the persistent-sadness flag, with a low threshold for external clinical referral • Set a review date and adjust to capacity, not the timetable

Case Study 3 – Matt - Year 10, 16 Years Old

Presenting concern:

Matt identifies as Aboriginal. He is in year 10 and his attendance is at 60%. He rarely turns up on time to school and when he gets to school is disruptive. He has been suspended twice for vaping. He is working at Year 6 level in literacy, but excels at maths. His mother is very concerned about his gaming habits. Follows all other school rules and attends class when present. He has some suicidal ideation which he disclosed to his mother.

Biological

- ADHD meds impact sleep
- Struggles with literacy with family history of dyslexia.
- Sensitive temperament
- Gifted athlete
- Vaping because “it helps him think”

Psychological

- Unsure about own identity
- Past trauma with biological father who is no longer in his life.
- ADHD traits of impulsivity and hyperactivity have got him into trouble – feels a lack of control over own behaviour.
- Anxiety – externalizes
- Suicidal ideation

Social

- Many friends who are girls but unsure how to keep boundaries in friendships.
- Very popular with male friends but lonely as connections are often based on interests.
- Poor teacher relationships
- Single parent family and four younger siblings.

Systemic

- Kicked out of sporting teams at school because of poor attendance, behaviour and vaping.
- High energy at school with limited opportunities to burn it off.
- Very punitive and shaming response to vaping – removed as sports captain publicly.

Predisposing – ADHD, learning issues?, temperament, anxiety, lack of adult and cultural support at school
Precipitating – kicked off sporting teams and shamed for vaping, impact on friendships and place in school
Perpetuating – lack of sporting activities increase school difficulties and removed protective male friendships, identity issues, shame about behaviour, sleep deprived.
Protective –

FIRST PRIORITY — BUILD RAPPORT & ENGAGE

Connect & build trust first

Matt is unwilling to engage and motivation is very low (1/5) — relationship and cultural safety come before any reintegration

- **Start with Aboriginal Education staff:** Make connecting Matt with the AEO/AEW/ALO — and, with consent, community or Elders — the very first step, so re-engagement begins through a culturally safe relationship rather than a school demand.
- **Lead with his trusted adult:** Identify who Matt is most likely to open up to and let that person carry first contact; treat his unwillingness as distress, not defiance
- **Yarn, don't summon:** Begin with an informal yarn — no agenda, no attendance or behaviour talk — focused only on listening and building trust.
- **No demands attached:** Keep all early contact low-pressure and free of expectations; trust has to be earned before any plan is introduced.

ALONGSIDE THIS — SAFETY

Risk of harm — in parallel

Risk-of-harm indicators identified; this runs alongside rapport-building and must not be delayed

- **Assess now, in parallel:** The urgent clinical assessment proceeds straight away — it is not held back until rapport is built.
- **Approach it through the relationship:** Let the trusted, culturally safe person be the bridge into the safety conversation so it does not feel clinical or punitive
- **Formal safety plan:** Develop it with a mental health professional, Matt and his family, and work with the family to make his environment safer.
- **Crisis access:** Ensure the family can reach crisis support at any time, with the AEO/AEW involved so support stays culturally safe

INDIVIDUAL CONCERNS

1. Identity, self-worth & shame

Unsure of own identity; past trauma with absent father; shame about behaviour; feels out of control

2. ADHD, regulation & sleep

Impulsivity and hyperactivity; ADHD meds affecting sleep; vaping used to focus and self-regulate

3. Learning gap & engagement

Working at Year 6 level in literacy with likely dyslexia; excels at maths; disengaged when present

- **Lead with strengths:** Use a narrative, strengths-based approach that names his resilience, athletic talent, and roles as a big brother who his siblings look up to.
- **Validate then reframe:** Acknowledge his feelings without agreeing with harsh self-assessments; shift focus from outcomes to effort and growth.
- **Connect to what matters:** Anchor re-engagement to his own goals and interests (sport, maths) so school links to a future he wants.
- **Understand the vaping:** Treat vaping as an attempt to self-regulate and focus, not defiance—address the underlying need and avoid punitive shaming responses.
- **Regulation toolkit:** Co-design strategies that work for him, agree a break signal, and build in movement breaks to discharge high energy.
- **Sleep and medication:** Partner with family and the prescriber on sleep hygiene and medication timing; consider a temporary later start if helpful.
- **Assess the gaps:** Arrange a thorough assessment of his literacy needs and likely dyslexia to target support accurately.
- **Targeted, scaffolded support:** Provide focused literacy intervention with scaffolds (organisers, sentence starters) while protecting his dignity.
- **Build on maths:** Anchor the timetable around his maths strength and interests, with a flexible load and alternative ways to show learning.

SYSTEMIC AND EXTERNAL CONCERNS

4. Punitive & shaming responses

Suspended for vaping; publicly removed as sports captain; poor teacher relationships

5. Removal from sport & energy outlets

Kicked off school teams; high energy with few outlets; sport is his key social, cultural and protective tie

6. Cultural connection & family support

Identifies as Aboriginal; single-parent family with four younger siblings; possible past negative experiences of school

- **Shift the staff response** Brief staff to reframe his behaviour as need-driven and agree a consistent, non-shaming approach — never public shaming.
- **Restorative, not punitive** Respond to vaping and behaviour restoratively; a Functional Behaviour Assessment can identify triggers and function.
- **Rebuild relationships & standing:** Strengthen bonds with staff, see as fair, use warm welcome back practices, and find a dignified way to rebuild the status the public removal took away.
- **Find a way back into sport:** Sport is a core protective factor, cultural tie and energy outlet — prioritise a realistic pathway back onto a team or into training.
- **Use sport as the bridge** Let sport and extracurriculars be a less intimidating reason to be on campus and to reconnect with his male friendships.
- **Daily outlets & leadership** Build regular movement into the day, explore mentoring or leadership roles, and link attendance to the sporting goals he cares about.
- **Embed cultural support:** Ensure a current, culturally informed PLP co-designed with Matt, family and Aboriginal Education staff, with cultural identity and connection as explicit goals.
- **Culturally safe family contact:** Use yarning and phone or face-to-face contact with the AEO/AEW as a bridge, acknowledge any past negative experiences with empathy, strengths-based and never deficit-framed.
- **Cultural safety & anti-racism:** Establish a culturally safe space, check for any experienced racism, and respond through the ARCO and anti-racism processes if needed.





When Interventions Don't Work

Review · collaborate · escalate



When an intervention isn't working, the first question is not 'which strategy should we try next?' — it is 'is the formulation right?'

Wrong domain?

Have we been working on the most prominent contributor? A student not responding to anxiety strategies may actually be experiencing burnout — requiring a fundamentally different response.

Missing information?

Has something significant been overlooked — a sensory factor, a family stressor, a cultural consideration?

Is the school part of the problem?

If individual-level interventions aren't changing things, ask whether the school environment itself needs to change. This is a systemic formulation question.

Is the plan being implemented consistently?

All team members need to know and follow the plan. Inconsistency in implementation is a common and underexplored reason progress stalls. It might indicate that the plan is not workable or lack of understanding.

Know your young person

The most important information about attendance difficulties is very likely to come from the young person themselves. Curiosity and unconditional positive regard are integral in understanding the drivers of emotion based school avoidance.

Flexible pathways

Full-time return to a mainstream setting is not always the right short-term goal. Flexible re-engagement — a gradual return, modified program, or alternative setting — is a consistent feature of the most effective programs in the study tour.

Know when to refer ... and work collaboratively

If there are significant mental health concerns, if the family is in crisis, or if progress has stalled despite a sound formulation and consistent implementation — bring in additional expertise. Your formulation gives the next professional a structured handover.

1

The young person's inner world is rarely simple

Seek to understand and hear the young person's voice before seeking solutions. Look across all four domains before settling on your formulation hypothesis. The most important contributor is not always the most obvious one.

2

The formulation shapes the plan

If the strategies aren't working, go back to the formulation — not just the strategy list. The hypothesis must be right before the plan can be effective.

3

The school environment is part of the equation ... but so is everything else

The school environment is part of the equation — but so is everything else EBSA is not solely a student problem, and it's not solely a school problem either. The KITES framework reminds us that there are many competing factors at play — across the individual, family, school, and broader context. The school's culture, flexibility, and responsiveness are active variables, but so are all the other domains. Effective formulation means holding that complexity, not collapsing it into a single cause.

Resources & Further Reading

Reconnect to School Kit · mrlavitt.au/rtsk · Free, no login required

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