

Reconnect to School Kit – A Trauma Informed Tool for Addressing Emotion Based School Avoidance

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Acknowledgement of Country



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Saretta Fielding

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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:

- 1 A shared definition of EBSA
- 2 A framework for identification
- 3 Case formulation skills
- 4 A free digital tool: the RTSK
- 5 One worked case study
- 6 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



What works in school?



Prioritisation of wellbeing and support



Strong focus on the learner as an individual



Values-driven culture and clear educational philosophy



Working collaboratively across disciplines and settings

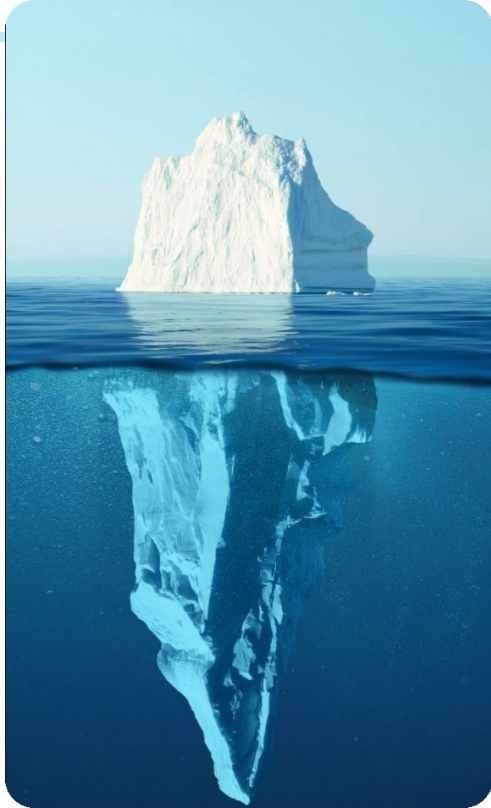


Flexible education pathways and delivery



Addressing barriers to engagement

Features seen across the specialised schools and programs on the study tour.



Solving EBSA problems is an inclusive education issue.

Case formulation identifies barriers and makes visible what is hidden behind avoidance, distress and disengagement.

Looking for the pattern, not just absence 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.

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."



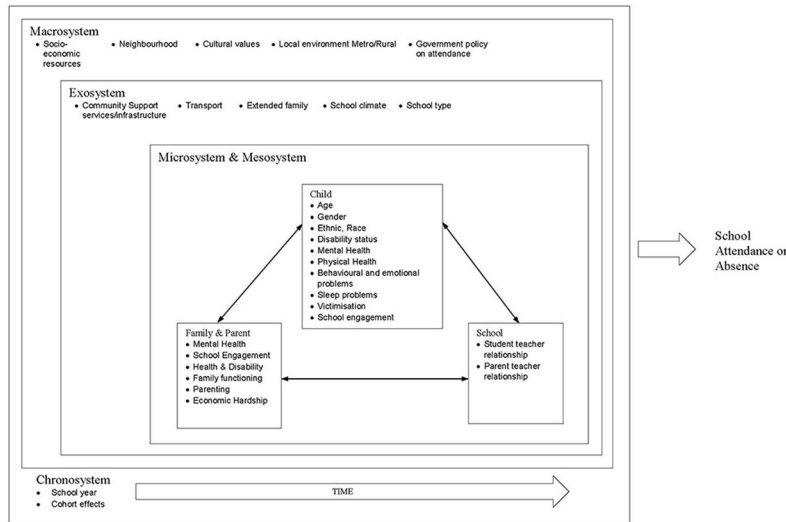
Case formulation: WHY

"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.

The KiTeS framework: Melvin et al. (2019)

Kids and Teens at School (KiTeS): a bioecological systems approach



1

The student is embedded in systems

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

2

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?

3

Multiple intervention points

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



If there is 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 et al., 2008).

1 Co-created, not delivered

Built with the young person and family, establishing joint attention and a shared understanding rather than handing down a verdict (Bateman & Fonagy).

2 Held provisionally

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

3 Builds epistemic trust

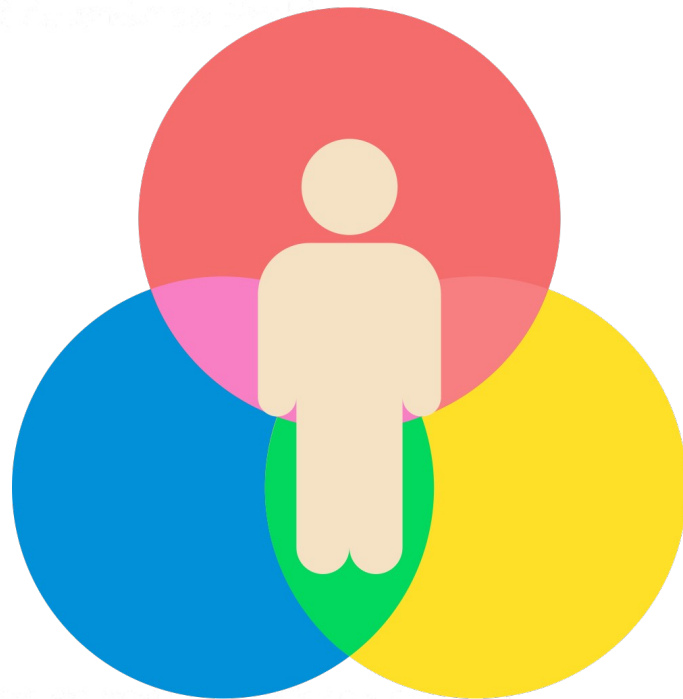
Feeling accurately understood lowers epistemic mistrust and opens the young person to learning and change (Fonagy & Allison).

In **AMBIT**, mentalising is the organising framework, extended from the clinical relationship to teams and multi-agency networks (Bevington et al., 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



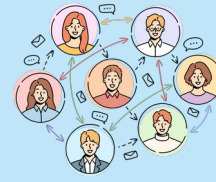
Psychological

Anxiety
Depression
Personality
Emotional regulation
Coping skills
Functional behaviour
Burnout



Social

Supports
Socio-economic
Peer relationships
Teacher connections
School alienation



Systemic

Basic needs
School factors
Curriculum
Inclusivity



Bioecological model

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

Biological domain: what is happening in the body and brain?

Neurodiversity

Autistic students, students with ADHD, and those with learning differences are disproportionately represented in EBISA presentations. Sensory overwhelm, social processing differences and demand avoidance all intersect significantly with school attendance.

Sensory sensitivities

Noisy canteens, crowded corridors, unpredictable environments: for a sensory-sensitive student, the school environment is a source of chronic, cumulative stress. This is a systemic problem as much as an individual one.

Somatic symptoms and nervous system responses

Headaches, stomach aches, fatigue. Real, and functional.

Gender identity

Gender-diverse students have elevated risk.

Psychological domain: internal experience and coping

Anxiety

Look for the specific type: separation anxiety, social anxiety, generalised anxiety, panic.

Depression and mood

Low mood, withdrawal and loss of interest frequently co-occur with anxiety in EBSA. They can both accompany and maintain school avoidance over time.

Autistic burnout

Distinct from depression. Characterised by exhaustion from masking and managing demands. Presents as global withdrawal rather than situation-specific fear.

Emotional regulation and coping

Avoidance provides short-term relief, which reinforces the pattern. A young person with limited regulation tools gravitates toward avoidance. Identifying what coping skills exist, and what is missing, is essential.

Social domain: relationships, context and belonging

Peer relationships

Peer difficulties (exclusion, conflict, or simply disconnection) are a powerful driver of avoidance. A key question: who is this student's safe person at school?

Teacher connections

A single strong, consistent teacher or other staff relationship can be a powerful protective factor.

School alienation

The sense that "school is not a place for me". How does this young person understand their own place in their school community? This matters for every re-engagement plan.

Family and socioeconomic context

Family stress, instability or significant socioeconomic pressure affects a student's capacity to engage. The support systems around the family also belong in this domain.

Systemic domain: the environment as a variable

School culture and inclusivity

Is this a school where difference is actively valued? Does the school's culture support students who don't fit the mainstream mould, or does it amplify shame?

Curriculum and flexibility

Is the curriculum accessible? What happens when a student falls behind: does the system support re-engagement, or does it compound academic anxiety?

Basic needs first

Safety and belonging must be met before learning is possible. Ask: what would it take for this student to feel safe at school today?

Cultural context and safety

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, culturally safe practice is a clinical and ethical requirement. This is also true for other cultural groups.

The five Ps framework

Weerasekera (1996); Macneil et al. (2012)

1

Presenting

Observable difficulty with attending school accompanied by emotional distress.

2

Predisposing

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

3

Precipitating

What triggered the issue at this moment in time? Was there an internal or external "event", or a cluster of events, that tipped the young person into overwhelm?

4

Perpetuating

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

5

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.

Trauma: a thread through every domain

Trauma can drive avoidance

- Children with two or more adverse childhood experiences have about 1.8 times the odds of chronic absence. (*Stempel et al., 2017*)
- In Australian linked data, substantiated maltreatment was associated with over three times the odds of chronic unexplained absence. (*Armfield et al., 2020*)
- Bullying and poor peer and teacher relationships are associated with school refusal. (*Havik et al., 2015*)
- 62% of Australians report at least one type of maltreatment before age 18. (*Higgins et al., 2023*)

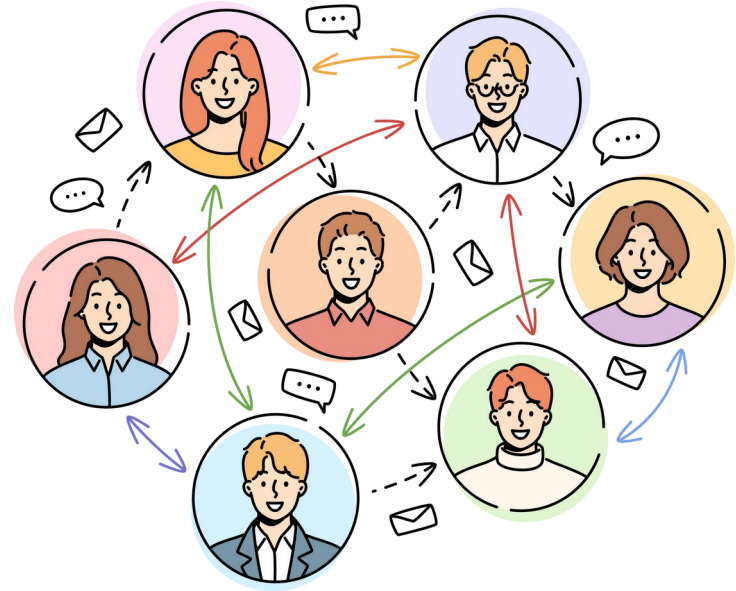
School as a source of trauma

- In a UK sample of 947 children with school distress, 92% were neurodivergent and 83% autistic. (*Connolly et al., 2023*)
- Around 44% of autistic students experience bullying victimisation at school. (*Maïano et al., 2016*)
- Autistic people describe sensory overload, social exclusion and being misunderstood as traumatic; standard trauma measures often miss these events. (*Kerns et al., 2022; Rumball et al., 2020*)
- Restraint, humiliation and unmet needs feature in accounts of autistic students before exclusion. (*Brede et al., 2017*)

Ask: what has happened to this young person, including at school?

Case Studies

Seeing the formulation in action



Understanding the student's 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.

Resources to elicit student perspectives

- [Landscape of Fear \(primary\)](#)
- [Student Stress Investigation](#)
- [Picture Cards for EBSA](#)
- [My School Experience \(Amaze\)](#)
- [Reconnect to School Kit \(RTSK\)](#)



Reconnect to School Kit

A free case formulation and intervention planning tool

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 strategies

Evidence-informed strategies, with links to resources and questionnaires for 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.

mrlavitt.au/rtsk · Free · No login required · Export to Word or PDF

Case study 2: Amber, Year 5, 10 years old

Presenting concern: Amber is Autistic and had good attendance in early primary in 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, with significant sensory sensitivities
- Above grade level in literacy and numeracy; FSIQ in very high range
- Puberty within last two years, recently got her first period.

Psychological

- Exhaustion from masking and managing demands
- Global withdrawal, not situation-specific
- Severely impaired regulation during distress peaks
- Highly internalised at school but externalising at home

Social

- One close friend
- Friend is now in a different class
- Trust with new teacher not yet established
- Social relationships increasing in complexity and moving online

Systemic

- No quiet space or regulation break option
- PLSP not reviewed this year
- Environment not adapted to sensory or regulation needs
- Very large classes and old or temporary buildings

Amber: formulation

1

Predisposing

Autistic, gifted, high-masking female.

2

Precipitating

Friend placed in a different class; transition; significant drop-off in support.

3

Perpetuating

Hasn't been able to make new social connections and often struggles to understand unspoken communication, which leaves her lonely and out of sync with peers. Also bothered by classroom noise and by lights replaced over the holidays.

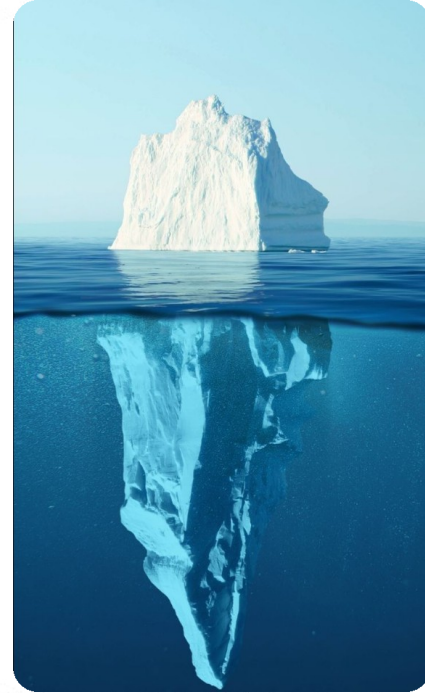
4

Protective

Family, high intelligence, forms very close one-to-one friendships.

When Interventions Don't Work

Review · collaborate · escalate



When progress stalls, go back to the formulation

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. Inconsistent implementation is a common and underexplored reason progress stalls; it may indicate the plan is not workable or not understood.

Three things to take away today

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

EBSA is not solely a student problem, and it is not solely a school problem either. The KiTeS framework reminds us that many factors are at play across the individual, family, school and broader context. Effective formulation means holding that complexity, not collapsing it into a single cause.

For further information:

Please visit the Not Just Staying Home website:

[Reconnect to School Kit — EBSA Resources | Leanne Brooke](#)

Australian Network of School Attendance :

[Australian Network for School Attendance: About | LinkedIn](#)

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Resources and further reading

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

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