Section 7: Supporting Autistic Children and Young People Who Are Experiencing Emotionally Based School Avoidance

This section overlaps with the information for school and information for CYP sections. However it adds to this pack by highlighting background issues and specific approaches that might work better for autistic children and young people.

Why autistic children and young people are at risk for EBSA?

While any student can experience EBSA during their time at school, students with complex social emotional behaviour needs, such as autism, can find school life particularly stressful at times. The following cognitive deficit theories, outlined in Figure 13 , are commonly used to support an understanding of how day-to-day interactions in school can challenge autistic individuals.

Figure 13: Cognitive theories of Autism (NAIT, 2019)

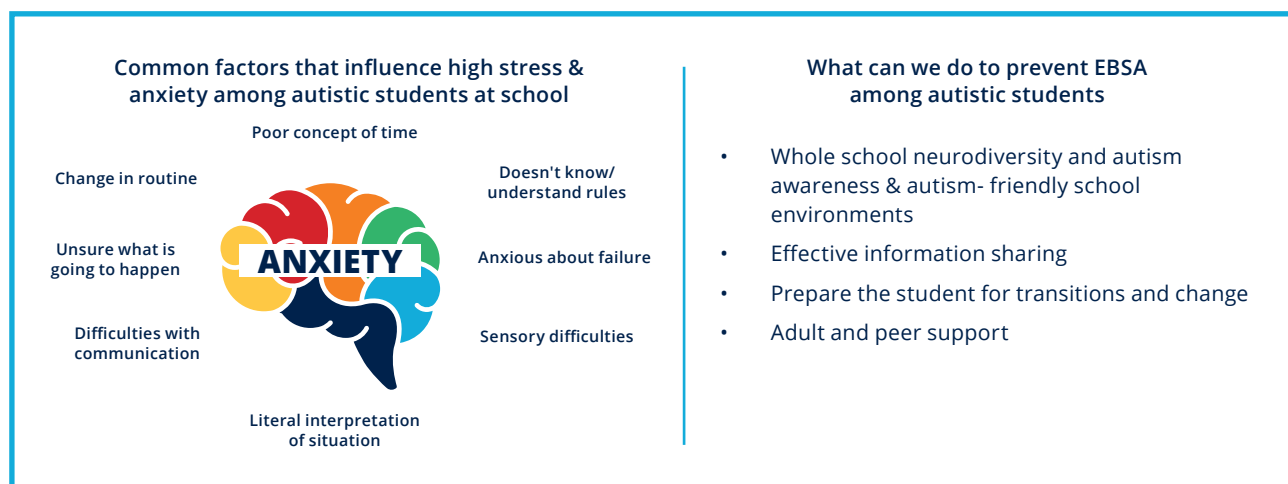| Theory of Mind	Executive Function	Weak Central Coherence	Context Blindness	Double Empathy Problem	Monotropism
• Develops from joint attention • Understanding other people's thoughts, feelings, beliefs & experience • Taking account of this understanding in your own actions	• The ability to plan, organise & sequence thoughts & actions • Control our impulses	• The tendancy to focus on details rather than the "big picture" which affects the person's ability to consider context.	• Challenge in processing or using all of the information from visual, auditory, historical & social contexts to make sense of experiences in the moment • Missing the 'obvious'	• A mutual challenge of misunderstanding intentions, motivations or communication between autistic and non-autistic people.	• A tendancy to focus attention on one thing at a time, with difficulty shifting attention & processing multiple stimuli which might support understanding

Within the emerging neurodiversity paradigm and the social model of disability, it is recognised that autism can result in fluctuating levels of disability, or differences, depending on the demands of the neurotypical world and available environmental supports (PSI Guidelines, 2022). Building cultures of inclusion is central to good intervention practice in school settings.

What schools need to know about autism – from autistic children and young people.

School life – how it impacts on autistic differences and behaviour

It is valuable to understand why a student might be behaving in a way that is causing concern. Through greater understanding, we are more likely to make reasonable adjustments and provide the appropriate support to reduce or replace that behaviour, and potentially avoid school refusal. This can also help families who see different behaviour at home compared to behaviour seen in school.

Figure 14: Identifying stress factors and preventing EBSA among autistic students.

Common factors that influence high stress & anxiety among autistic students at school

Poor concept of time

Change in routine

Doesn't know/ understand rules

Unsure what is going to happen

ANXIETY

Anxious about failure

Difficulties with communication

Sensory difficulties

Literal interpretation of situation

What can we do to prevent EBSA among autistic students

- Whole school neurodiversity and autism awareness & autism- friendly school environments
- Effective information sharing
- Prepare the student for transitions and change
- Adult and peer support

There is no "one size fits all" approach to plan for autistic students. Each is an individual, and the same behaviour observed in a number of autistic students may have different causes or functions. It is also important to understand a student's actions from their perspective. The AET link on the next page provides some insight into how autistic young people experience school and their advice on how schools can support them.

AET How to support young people with autism in school and college

www.youtube.com/watch?v=y0ubxEOIuSw
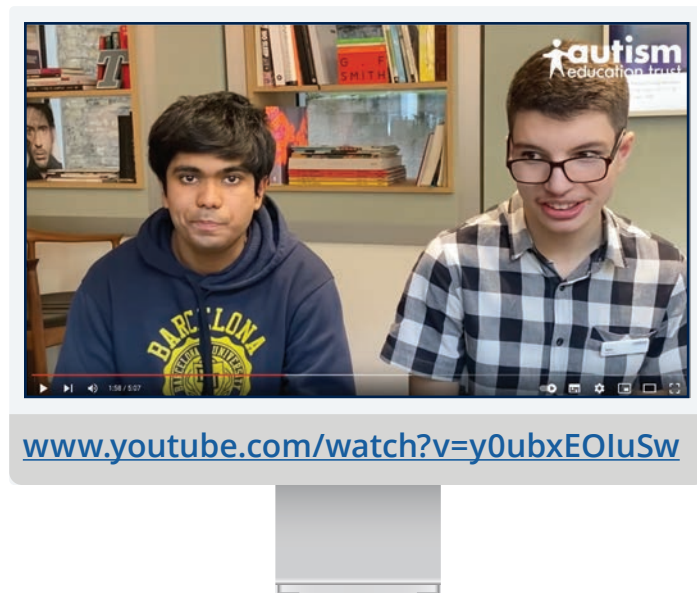
The following section looks at what we can do to manage emotionally based school avoidance among autistic children and young people.

Problem Solving Step 1: Identification of Need/Gathering Information

**What is the concern and why is it happening? (NEPS problem Solving Approach)**

Gathering information from the child/young person

Techniques that work for other CYP experiencing EBSA may also work for autistic students so we advise that techniques such as "Drawing the Ideal School" and mapping the school are considered. (See Section 6: Information for schools)

The following are examples of Person-Centred Planning Tools which are mainly visual. They might help when a student is nonverbal or finds it particularly difficult to express their needs or emotion to others. Indeed many of the techniques listed below are also helpful for CYP with general learning disability/difficulties.

Talking Mats is a light-technology framework that uses picture symbols representing topics, options, and emotions to help

https://www.talkingmats.com
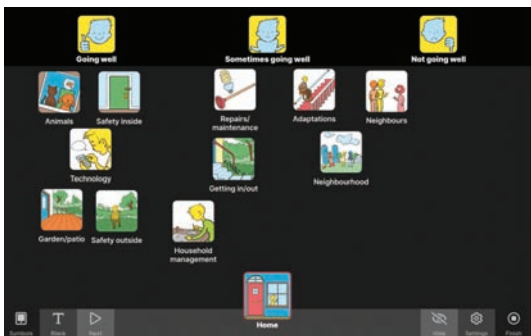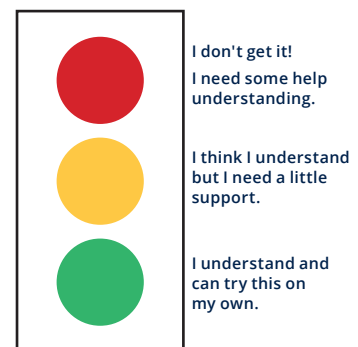

How do I feel today?

The Feelings Ladder can be used by CYP to identify where they are on a feelings scale. Questions may be asked to gather views on why a child placed their feeling where they did, and what might make them move up/down the ladder
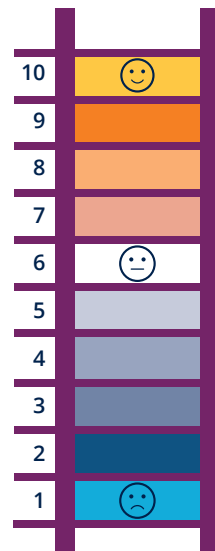
Likert Scale Faces may be used in the form of a colour or emoji face scale to allow children and young people to identify how something makes them feel.
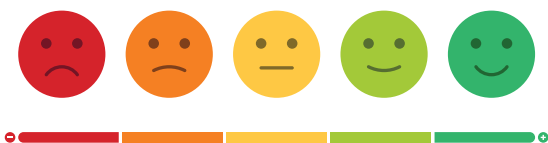
If the school mapping exercise if too difficult then the **Traffic Lights Technique** can be useful for students to self-reflect on how they have found aspects of school life, as well as their feelings about school.

I don't get it! I need some help understanding.

I think I understand but I need a little support.

I understand and can try this on my own.

For more advice on using Person Centred Planning Tools with autistic children and young people, see Appendix 1 of the Autism Good Practice Guidance for Schools (2022). https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/8d539-autism-good-practice-guidance-for-schools-supporting-children-and-young-people/

Gathering information on autistic CYP from supporting adults

As with all CYP, you will gather information from supporting adults. In the case of autistic CYP, it can be valuable to know if a child or young person knows they are autistic, or if autism is a diagnosis the CYP understands or identifies with.

Observations, checklists and autism-friendly assessment tools can contribute greatly to an understanding of a student's strengths and needs at school and how they might be influencing emotion-based school avoidance.

For more examples of how to support the identification of needs in a learning environment, see Resource Box 4 of Autism Good Practice Guidance to Schools (2022). https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/8d539-autism-good-practice-guidance-for-schools-supporting-children-and-young-people/

Gathering and sharing information in a way that can help

Communication Passports are one example of how to share key information on what can help or hinder an individual student at school (see Appendix 8 for examples).

During transition periods, it will be essential to share what worked well in previous school settings. With parental consent this can be assisted by the systematic use of **Transfer Profiles** and collaborative discussion between schools. Early contact with home and student school visits in advance of a transition is considered good practice.

Before starting in a new school: Key tips on Proactive Transition & Induction Supports

Target parents of autistic students/pupils for school induction including:
- Have we established if the child/young person has been made aware of their autism diagnosis?
- Have we established clear communication pathways between school and home, including phone/email contacts and/or scheduled parent-teacher meetings etc?
- Have we facilitated school visit/virtual tour in advance of the student/pupils' first day? Provide photos of staff, maps of school building etc., where possible.
- Have we engaged in early dialogue relating to awareness of school policies and adaptations required to support an individual autistic student (e.g., uniform policy, homework policy etc.)
- Have we examined previous school reports and professional reports for evidence of EBSA or EBSA risk factors?

For more information.

Pupil Passports see Appendix and Call Scotland Communication Passports
www.callscotland.org.uk/blog/personal-communication-passports/
www.communicationpassports.org.uk/creating-passports/

Problem Solving Step 2: Intervention Planning-How can we help?

a) Advice on intervention management in a school

All schools should aim to become familiar with the Autism Good Practice Guidance for Schools (2022) and its comprehensive guide to developing autism-friendly teaching and learning interventions across 8 key domains associated with good practice.

- Learning environment support
- Language and communication development
- Social development
- Emotional development
- Sensory processing
- Functional skills & daily living
- Academic development
- Behavioural development

https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/8d539-autism-good-practice-guidance-for-schools-supporting-children-and-young-people/

b) The importance of autism and anxiety awareness/acceptance

All adults, parents and staff need to build their understanding of autism and their understanding and acceptance of various emotional states across a school day. The development of healthy coping skills in schools, including how adults' thoughts, feelings or actions might influence a child's success at school is valuable. Autistic CYP often mask/camouflage their anxiety throughout the school day, then express high levels of distress and even aggression when home. This is referred to as the Cola Bottle analogy.

Bad Behaviour After School?

The Cola Bottle Analogy

https://www.belfastlive.co.uk/news/health/coke-bottle-video-explains-autistic-14626730.

Neurotypical Day/Response to Anxiety	Autistic students are likely to start their day at the higher level of Anxiety – the green line.
1. You might get up in the morning worried about the day ahead.	1. They may wake up anxious.
2. You calm yourself down by thinking calmly about the day over a cup of tea.	2. Their parent calms them down by looking at their home visual timetable for the day.
3. You set off for work and there is a diversion on the road.	3. Perhaps none of their favourite cereal is left, but they find an alternative they like.
4. You start to get anxious about being late and take a detour.	4. They set off to school later than usual so someone else gets to the front of the line first.
5. Many others have taken the same route and now you are stuck in traffic and are very late.	5. Someone else gets the coat peg they had wanted.
6. Suddenly, the car behind bangs into yours!	6. Someone brushes past them and brushes them softly on the arm.
7. No one is hurt, but it will take the rest of the day for you to return to the level you were at the beginning of the day.	7. That's it, they've lost it. They are on the ground kicking and screaming. They are 'over the losing it line!' The adults are all saying, "There was no reason at all for that! It's come from nowhere." But it hasn't.

Another analogy that can explain anxiety build up is called the 'Losing it Line'. This graph shows anxiety levels over time and demonstrates the differences between neurotypical and neurodiverse individuals' experience of anxiety, and anxiety's impact on behaviour.

Figure 15: 'Losing It" Line Graph
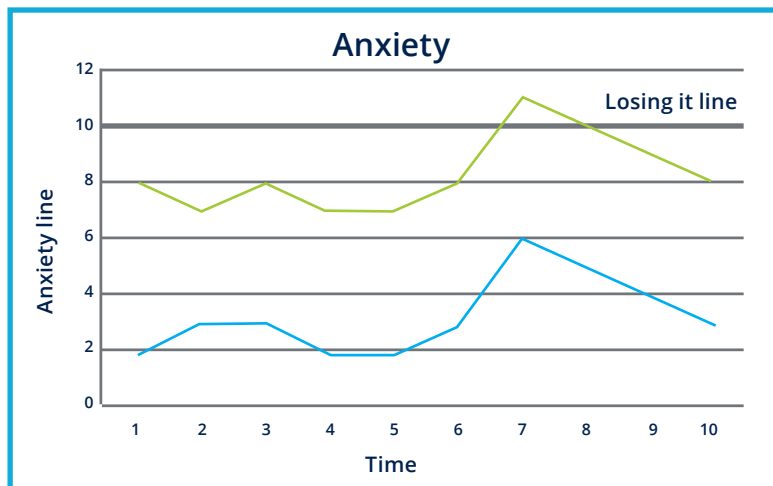
Understanding the 'Losing it Line' graph, The Y axis marks the level of anxiety, and the X axis is the passage of time. Each point on the coloured lines represents a different event in the day. The blue line along the lower part of the graph represents most people on an average day with nothing big or significant going on in our lives to cause major distress.

Key tips on autism and anxiety awareness/acceptance:

Regularly scheduled Autism Awareness training for staff is valuable to all schools.
Middletown Centre for Autism provides training for parents too.

•	NCSE Support Services in school training-https://ncse.ie/school-support

•	AsIAm Book a Talk-https://asiam.ie/book-a-speaker/

•	Middletown Centre for Autism: Training-www.middletownautism.com

For more information on how parents can explain autism to children and young people, see Autism Good Practice Guidance, p.24, Resource Box 1: Explaining autism to children and young people'.
https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/8d539-autism-good-practice-guidance-for-schools-supporting-children-and-young-people/
For more information on the relationship between autism and anxiety related school absence,
see NAIT Anxiety Related Absence Guidance 2020.pdf (autismtoolbox.co.uk)
Autism Good Practice Guidance: A Closer look Anxiety
https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/8d539-autism-good-practice-guidance-for-schools-supporting-children-and-young-people/
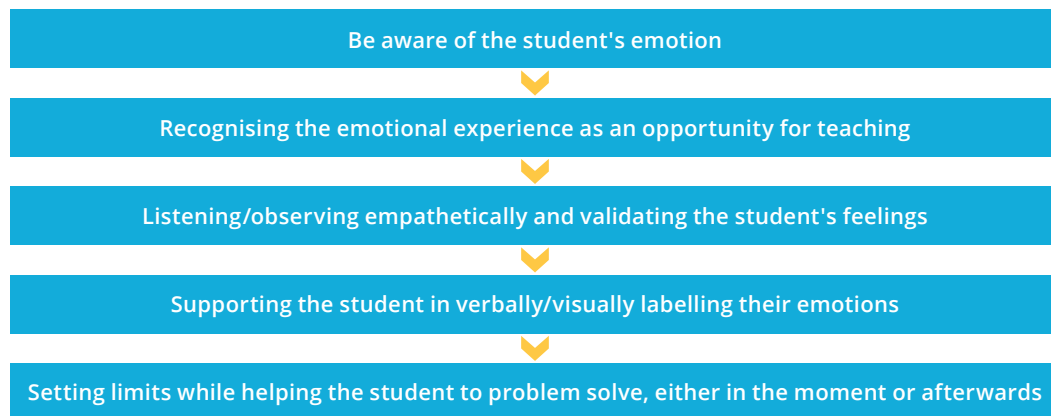
c) The importance of building relationships and supporting adults.

While it is important to avoid over-dependence on one member of staff, it can be valuable in large schools to establish a consistent Key Adult/Key Teacher support system as part of an autistic student's Support Plan. This can help a large school to plan for a student's need for predictability in adult responding when the student feels overwhelmed.

Strategies such as emotion coaching and co-regulation techniques can assist a Key Adult at school in responding to a CYP when they are in distress. See Autism Good Proactive Guidance for schools' chapter on Emotion Development and adult-led emotion supports for more advice:
https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/8d539-autism-good-practice-guidance-for-schools-supporting-children-and-young-people/

Figure 16: Co-Regulating Technique

Be aware of the student's emotion

⌄

Recognising the emotional experience as an opportunity for teaching

⌄

Listening/observing empathetically and validating the student's feelings

⌄

Supporting the student in verbally/visually labelling their emotions

⌄

Setting limits while helping the student to problem solve, either in the moment or afterwards

Check and Connect strategies are also a valuable framework for frequent proactive intervention planning to address issues that can cause worry for a student, if left unassisted. See Check and Connect: A structured adult mentoring intervention for students:
www.nbss.ie/interventions-and-projects/behaviour-for-learning/check-and-connect

Schools should organise regular autism awareness training for all staff and parent groups, including lunchtime supervisors/ancillary staff. This can assist in building proactive environmental and sensory supports that can help when creating a low arousal state that helps to reduce triggering behaviours. For example:

Carry out sensory audits in key rooms/areas of the school that can trigger stress

https://sensory-processing.middletownautism.com/sensory-strategies/sensory-audit-for-school-and-classrooms/

Provide sensory safe spaces in school and develop a plan to enable access when needed

https://asiam.ie/about-autism/sensory-space/

NCSE Resources on occupational therapy support ideas (home and school)

https://ncse.ie/resources-for-teachers-on-occupational-therapy-support

Work with families to develop morning and after school routine (encourage use of visual schedules, down time after school and strategies to relieve stress e.g., exercise, trampoline or punch bag).

d) The importance of building relationships with Peers

Schools and families can support autistic students in building relationships with peers and sharing common interests with others by promoting opportunities for meaningful social interactions during break times for example, alternatives to unstructured leisure time, or sports activities, where needed, or structured activities centred on areas of special interest (Nurture Room access, Social Café, chess, coding, sci fi club etc.).
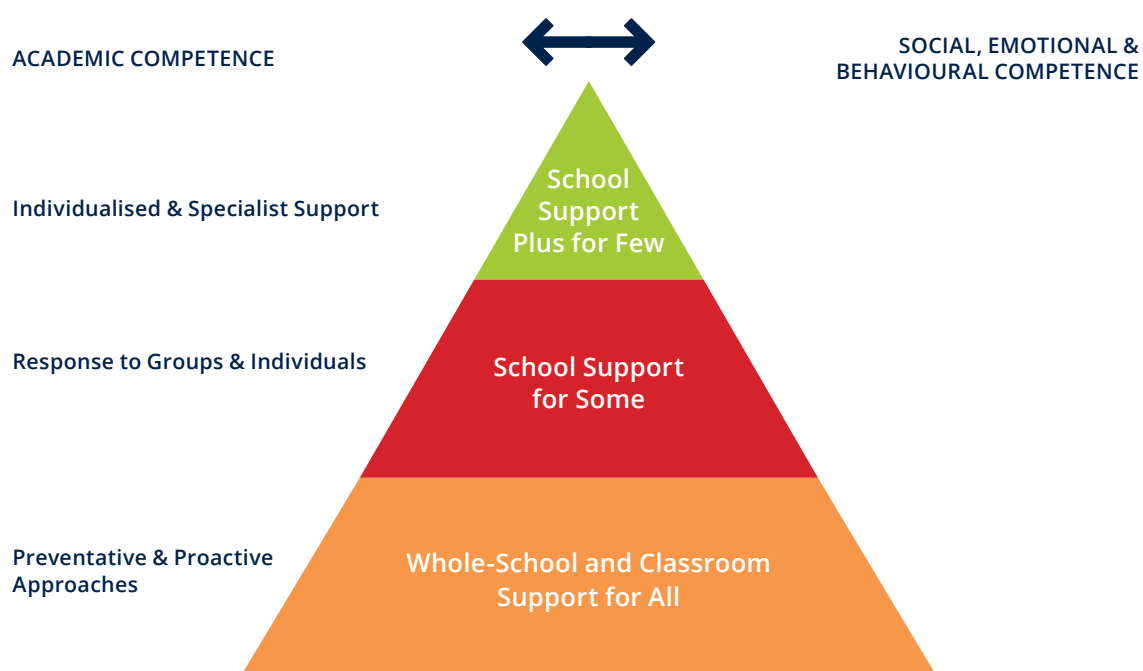
A school's, Anti-Bullying Policy should include discrimination of neuro-diverse students/pupils. Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) lessons and assemblies can also help teach all students about accepting diversity and difference, including disabilities. A general assembly to teach autism awareness/acceptance may avoid a particular student feeling uncomfortable. Other resources that might be helpful:

- Neurodiversity in the classroom: a teacher's guide
  www.structural-learning.com/post/neurodiversity-in-the-classroom-a-teachers-guide

- The Learning About Neurodiversity at School (LEANS) resource
  www.ed.ac.uk/salvesen-research/our-projects/learning-about-neurodiversity-at-school

- Autism/Neurodiversity awareness for all students/pupils
  Pandas Online www.pandasonline.org

Step 3: Monitor student outcomes and build effective practise at all levels of the Continuum of Support

Did it work?

ACADEMIC COMPETENCE

SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL & BEHAVIOURAL COMPETENCE

Individualised & Specialist Support

School Support Plus for Few

Response to Groups & Individuals

School Support for Some

Preventative & Proactive Approaches

Whole-School and Classroom Support for All

When developing an EBSA Support Plan for an autistic child or young person, it will be valuable to include their voice in any outcome measure. Repeating procedures used at the Information Gathering phase is a useful way to establish if change has occurred and/or what new targets are needed.

In line with the Continuum of Support, prevention of EBSA at whole school and classroom level remains key for autistic students, as it does for others. Sometimes more targeted interventions at School Support/Support for Some level and/or reactive interventions at School Support Plus/Support for a Few are required. When this occurs, parents should be encouraged to express their priorities are for their child. Set realistic targets and nurture communication structures that enable effective information sharing.

Quick Guide to EBSA Planning for autistic students through CoS

	What's needed in a Plan	Resources
PREVENTING EBSA among autistic students Whole School/Classroom Support/Support for All Who needs to be involved at this level (All staff, All students/pupils at school, Parent body)	Whole school awareness & understanding of autism and how it can affect learning and wellbeing Whole school staff awareness of EBSA (see school support chapter for more ideas) Whole school social inclusion and emotional wellbeing plan, including prevention of bullying and discrimination Effective general transition planning supports between schools and clear communication pathways between home and school	NCSE Support Services in school training https://ncse.ie/school-support AsIAm Book a Talk https://asiam.ie/book-a-speaker/ Middletown Centre for Autism: Training for Parents and Professionals www.middletownautism.com Government of Ireland: Autism Good Practice Guidance for Schools https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/8d539-autism-good-practice-guidance-for-schools-supporting-children-and-young-people/) AsIAm: Autism Guidance for Teachers https://asiam.ie/advice-guidance/education/autism-guidance-for-teachers/ Universal evidence-based interventions for wellbeing promotion and emotional resilience-building https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/a9118-catalogue-of-wellbeing-resources-for-schools/ HSE Emotional Wellbeing Resources for Post Primary school teachers https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/healthwellbeing/hse-education-programme/training-and-resources-for-post-primary-school-teachers/mental-health-training-and-resources-for-post-primary-school-teachers.html Restorative Practice https://www.restorativeresources.org/educator-toolkit.html NEPS Transitions from Primary to Post Primary & Transfer Review Profiles www.gov.ie/en/collection/84e52e-national-educational-psychological-service-neps-guidelines-tips-and-/#transfer-from-primary-to-post-primary

Quick Guide to EBSA Planning for autistic students through CoS

	What's needed in a Plan	Resources
TARGETED EBSA intervention for autistic students Support for Some/ School Support Who needs to be involved at this level (autistic students/pupils with a history of wellbeing and/or EBSA needs. Intermitted school refusers.)	A Key teacher assigned to support Planning in school and communication with home. Assessment and monitoring tools that help build an understanding of what's happening/what triggers EBSA for an individual case. Targeted evidence-based interventions for social emotional and behaviour confidence and competence.	KEY Teacher & Targeted transition planning for children and young people who have been identified previously as experiencing EBSA/ refusing to go to school in the past. • Activate information sharing early (as soon as a new school placement has been identified) • Regular scheduled meetings with school & home to review Student/Pupils strengths and areas of interest as well as their needs (see Transfer Profile/ Communication Passport for suggestions). • Assign Key Adult teacher support and set realistic expectations and goals for home and school • Managing cycles of anxiety at home and school Autism Good Practice Guidance for schools on intervention development in social, emotional, behaviour advice for school https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/8d539-autism-good-practice-guidance-for-schools-supporting-children-and-young-people/ Middletown Centre for Autism: Anxiety Management best-practice.middletownautism.com/approaches-of-intervention/anxiety-management/ Building social interactions at school https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Developing-Social-Skills.pdf Wexford Parent HUB workshops/advice on managing social-emotional behaviour at home. http://www.wexfordcypsc.ie/wexford-parents-hub/contact-us

Quick Guide to EBSA Planning for autistic students through CoS

	What's needed in a Plan	Resources
REACTIVE Intervention planning Support for a Few/ School Support Plus Who needs this (Entrenched school avoidance for an extended period of time).	Key person support for families and continued Key teacher support in school.	School and interagency comprehensive planning for re-integration back to a learning environment (Home and School). AsIAm: School Refusal & Reduced Timetables asiam.ie/advice-guidance/education/reduced-timetables/