



"I'm proud of
myself because
I'm back at
school."

Young person
who received
Place2Be's support

Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA): Our work so far in Scotland

Attendance in Scotland's schools has deteriorated, with over a third of pupils persistently absent (an absence rate of 10% or more) in 2022-23. Research by Education Scotland showed that pupil and parental mental health are the most frequently cited drivers of absence by local authorities and schools.

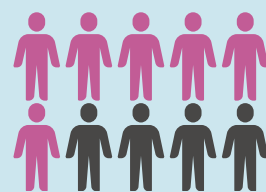
WHAT WE DID

Since January 2022, we have been delivering therapeutic support for young people who are partially disengaged or at risk of disengaging from school. Our community counsellor has worked alongside two school communities in South Ayrshire to improve mental health and support those young people to attend school or another positive destination.

We used a range of supports, all provided by the same counsellor:

- Full mental health assessments for young people, including discussing with the young person, their family, and a key member of school staff
- One-to-one counselling, including the use of CBT-informed therapies
- Gradual exposure to community venues and the school building and environment
- Support for parents/carers to better understand their child's behaviour and how they can support them, as well as signposting to adult and family support services
- Reflective sessions for school staff to enable better understanding of the function of EBSA behaviour in the young person and to help them plan for the return to school, including how to adapt some aspects of the school environment for the young person

The counsellor can meet the young person at home (via MS Teams), in a community location or in school. Throughout the counselling, they may use all three in a gradual staged approach. The goal is always to work towards a return to the school building or another positive destination.



41%

of secondary school pupils were persistently absent from school in 2022-23 (missing over 10% of the school year). Figures are higher for children in the most deprived areas and for children with additional support needs.

A gradual return:



For more information, please email:
scotland@place2be.org.uk

WHAT WE LEARNED

Referral routes

Originally set up as a more general community counselling service, we expected referrals for this service to come from community groups. However, referrals were more forthcoming through schools, concentrating on pupils who had partially disengaged or were at risk of disengaging from school. Both referral routes remain open but this information enabled us to target the work more.

Location flexibility

Having a range of locations where counselling can take place has been invaluable for those who are struggling to enter the school building. We have used community halls, libraries, and even adapted the school for this use, for example by using discrete entrances. As a result of this learning, we added the ability to work remotely with young people online whilst they are at home. The goal is always to gradually work towards re-introduction to the community and school.

Time Required

Building relationships with young people experiencing EBSA has taken longer than it usually does in Place2Be's traditional model of school counselling (avg. 13.77 sessions instead of 10). Having the time to build these trusting relationships has been crucial to the success of the project.

Scaffolding

In most cases, the counsellor was able to build strong relationships with parents and carers as well as the young person. This support was important in maintaining consistent attendance. The counsellor was also able to build the capacity of other professionals through training and reflective sessions which was important for a joined-up and sustainable approach.

Partnerships

We know we can't fix this issue alone. We can provide the therapeutic support children need, but by working with public and third sector partners we can complement this with help like flexible timetables, practical family support, academic support, and parental mental health support.

IMPACT OF EBSA

Low attendance negatively impacts attainment [1,2]

Attainment is affected if attendance falls below 90%. This is therefore affecting over a third of all pupils in Scotland and 4 in 10 secondary pupils.

Attending school can have a positive impact on life expectancy [3]

And not attending school has just as negative an impact on health as smoking or heavy drinking.

Mental health support is part of the solution [4]

Lower levels of persistent absence can be found after attending counselling; but this should be supported by tailored strategies to address the specific needs of young people and families, including peer support, mentorship, academic assistance, and family engagement programmes.

Pupils in the most deprived areas are more likely to have poor attendance [5]

For pupils living in SIMD Quintile 1, the overall attendance was 86.8% in 2022-23, compared to 93.5% in SIMD Quintile 5.

NEXT STEPS

We are continuing this project, taking into account what we have learned, and expanding it to work with young people in Dundee.

We are exploring opportunities and partnerships to deepen the support available for young people who are struggling with EBSA; building our training to scale capacity of other professionals; and we are contributing to the nationwide discussion on the issue.

[1] Improving Attendance: Understanding the Issues, Education Scotland, 2023: <https://education.gov.scot/media/3kdenpq4/improving-attendance-understanding-the-issues-101123-pw.pdf>

[2] Klein et al. (2022): School absenteeism and educational attainment - Evidence from the Scottish Longitudinal Study

[3] Balaj, Mirza et al. (2024): Effects of education on adult mortality: a global systematic review and meta-analysis

[4] Place2Be research with the University of Cambridge

[5] Summary Statistics for Schools in Scotland 2023 Supplementary Statistics, Scottish Government, 2024:

<https://www.gov.scot/news/summary-statistics-for-schools-in-scotland-2023-supplementary-statistics-published/>

Regan's Story

A composite story from the service

Place
2Be

Regan is 14 and loves music. Her bedroom is where she spends her time, its walls covered in posters of her favourite singer, Olivia Rodrigo.

But she finds it hard to leave that bedroom, and the idea of going to school is **anxiety-inducing**. At primary school her attendance started to suffer and it's got worse at high school. She's **lonely**; unable to make and keep friends and has started to feel **embarrassed** about her academic progress. She feels like she can't catch up even if she were able to try.



Regan lives with her Gran, Sharon, who worries about her but feels she can't help. Her Headteacher is worried about her mental health and that she won't be able to achieve her education potential.

We want to help Regan to change things, to feel **confident** and **empowered** to get out of her bedroom, and back into school. We want Regan to **achieve** her goals, both academically and personally.



Luckily, Regan is referred by her Headteacher to Place2Be's Community Counsellor who works with children and young people disengaged from school due to mental health difficulties. She takes the time to build a trusting relationship with Regan and offer her regular counselling sessions to support her back into school.

The sessions start in her local library and move into the school building via a discrete entrance. The Community Counsellor also supports Gran, and works with the school to remove some of the barriers to Regan entering the school building.

As a result, Regan has found the confidence to return to the school building and re-join classes. Best of all for Regan, she's also been able to go see Olivia Rodrigo with her friends.



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