

How can I help my child who is beginning to worry about going to school?

A Guide for Parents



Introduction

This guidance has been produced by Ceredigion Educational Psychology service (with thanks to EdPsychEd EBSA Horizons course for sharing their information and resources which we have drawn upon in this guidance). This is informed by current research and best practice to help children and young people and their families and schools with emotionally based barriers to education.

You may be worried about your child's attendance or that they are falling behind in schoolwork. You may be feeling judged by others. You might be exhausted from managing daily battles, supporting your child's emotional needs, or trying to balance work with caring responsibilities.

Our aim is to provide information and practical strategies to help families, if your child is starting to show signs that they don't want to attend school. Each family's situation is unique and we hope to provide you with strategies to explore your child's individual needs and begin navigating conversations with school.

This document will cover the following information:

- What is EBSA?
- Early signs
- Understanding barriers over time
- Anxiety cycle
- How to Help
- Quick tools you can share with your school
- Additional Resources

What is EBSA?

EBSA is not a diagnosis of a condition but a term used to describe a child or young person that feels so worried or overwhelmed about the thought of going to school that attending becomes really difficult.

We also use the phrase “barriers to attendance” because every child’s situation is different. It is often complicated with many factors playing a part.

It’s normal for children to go through times when they don’t want to go to school. Having worries about friendships, learning or changes is a normal part of growing up and we have all experienced feelings of worry from time to time.

It’s when worries become so great that they find it hard to physically attend school, that we can consider EBSA.

Early Signs

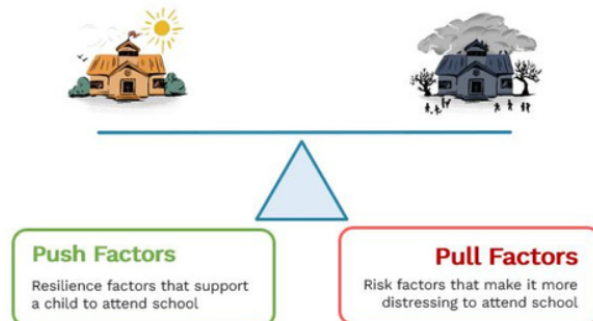
Children and young people often find it very hard to identify the cause of their worries and may struggle to explain this to parents or schools. The difficulty often shows up in different ways, here are some early indicators:

- Tummy aches, headaches and other physical symptoms.
- Difficulty going to bed at night before school or in waking up and getting out of bed in the morning and recurring lateness.
- A range of emotional behaviour, including angry or aggressive outbursts, crying and pleading.
- These changes can be sudden or gradual over time.



In many cases EBSA is not considered until non attendance is well established and their attendance has dropped significantly. This is unfortunate because by identifying these behaviours early we can ensure greater success in being able to support children to feel more able and confident to attend school. It is important therefore to share any concerns you may have with school.

Understanding how barriers to school attendance can change over time



School non-attendance occurs when “stress exceeds support, when risks are greater than resilience and when ‘pull’ factors that favour school non-attendance overcome the ‘push’ factors that encourage attendance” (Thambirajah et al, 2008: pg. 33)

Barriers to attendance can happen when the things that help a child feel safe and confident aren’t quite strong enough to balance the things that feel hard. It can help to think about three kinds of factors that influence this balance:

Push Factors (Protective or Resilience Factors) - Towards school

These are the things that push or encourage your child towards school, things that make school feel safe, welcoming and manageable. Examples might include:

- Supportive relationships with teachers and friends.
- Feeling understood and included.
- Predictable routines and calm mornings.
- Adjustments that meet your child’s needs (e.g. quieter spaces, flexible starts).
- Enjoying subjects or activities in school.

Pull Factors (Risk or Barrier Factors) - Away from school

These are the things that pull your child away from school, the worries or challenges that make attendance feel harder. Examples might include:

- Worries with about friendships, lessons, or changes in the school day.
- Feeling overwhelmed by noise, crowds, or workload.
- Fear of failure or embarrassment.
- Feeling safer, calmer, or more in control at home.

Maintenance Factors

These are the patterns that can unintentionally keep the worries going. For example:

- It is natural and understandable for parents to comfort their child when they are upset, which reinforces their feelings of safety and security at home.
- Staying home brings short term relief which helps in the moment, but makes returning to school the next day feel even harder.
- Missed lessons or friendships can also increase worries about going back to school.

These factors often overlap across a child's life, within themselves, at home and their wider environment and at school. Understanding how they interact helps identify where support can be strengthened.

It can be helpful to look at these factors across three areas: the child, their environment and the school.

Environmental	School
Push factors toward school are likely when: • They are able to meet with friends who are attending school. • They are a part of a good social network at school. • They have good habits, physical exercise, sleep patterns, balanced diet, reasonable screen time. • Everyone shares positive and consistent encouragement to attend school. • Parents are working or busy during the day so it's difficult to stay at home.	Push factors toward school are likely when there are: • Good trusting relationships with school staff. • Positive peer relationships or small friendship groups. • A key adult or "safe person" in school they can check in with. • When they experience a positive transition from home to school. • Flexible approaches within school and an understanding of individual needs. • Clear communication between school and home. • Opportunities to experience success and celebrate small wins.

Environmental

Pull factors away from school are likely when there are:

- Parent/family illness or changes at home which may make the separation from home difficult.
- When the child enjoys the security and flexibility of routine at home.
- When they have the freedom to play with games and watch tv when they have stayed home and not at school.
- An environment which may be less overwhelming with fewer distractions and less noise.

School

Pull factors away from school are likely when there are:

- Issues with friends, bullying or other social worries
- Feeling misunderstood
- Difficulties with school work/lessons.
- Difficult transitions between classes, teachers.
- Sensory issues from noise, busy spaces, lights etc.

Individual

Every child is unique. Some children are more sensitive to change, some find it harder to manage uncertainty. Others might have additional needs that make school life more demanding.

Push factors toward school are likely when:

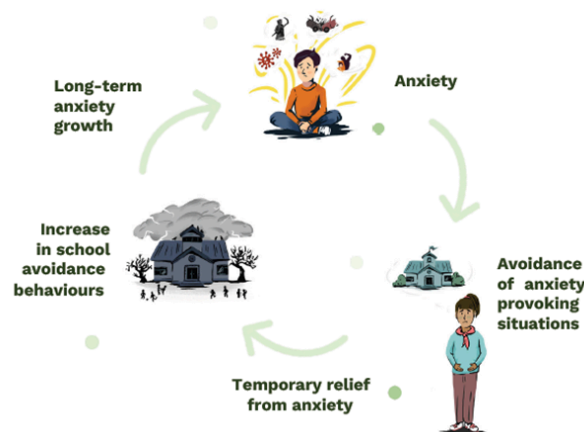
- They are motivated to attend school.
- Feeling confident and capable in at least one area of school life (learning, sport, art, friendships).
- Feeling a sense of belonging or connection to their friends and trusted adults in school.
- They have a sense of predictability – knowing what to expect each day.
- They have previous experiences of managing challenging situations successfully.
- They are aware of their feelings and know how to calm themselves or use coping strategies (deep breathing, taking breaks) when feeling worried.
- They have interests that link to school (e.g., enjoying certain lessons, clubs, or activities).
- They have good habits - sleep patterns, diet, and overall wellbeing.

Pull factors away from school are likely when:

- They are feeling nervous, shy or easily overwhelmed.
- They have very little motivation and doesn't see school as important.
- There are worries about friendships, lessons, or being away from family.
- Finding busy, noisy or unpredictable environments difficult.
- They have low confidence, self-esteem, or fear of failure.
- There may be underlying neurodivergence (e.g., autism, ADHD, sensory differences).

The Anxiety Cycle

When a child or young person avoids school, this can help them feel temporary relief. This relief is short lived and trying to attend school the next day is likely to be even harder. This is called the anxiety cycle.



Once a child is out of school the cycle may be maintained and strengthened because they may:

- Feel disconnected from their friends
- Have additional concerns about how they might keep up with missed schoolwork.
- Feel their time at home has been easier and feeling positive as they are spending more time with a family member or gaming or watching tv.

We can disrupt this cycle with small, manageable steps, listening to the child's views, creating a plan of support with school to identify goals and areas that need changing. By placing a focus on small steps - gentle reintroduction to the school environment with different approaches can help to increase confidence within the learning environment. This is how gentle reintegration works better than pressure, because it helps reduce worries instead of reinforcing it.

How can I help?

It is never too early to contact the school if you feel that your child is starting to experience some difficulty in attending.

Working collaboratively with your child's school ensures clear communication between all settings. In EBSA research, this is shown to be essential for success as it helps your child to feel supported and understood.

Many schools in Ceredigion have received training in EBSA and may have a dedicated person (EBSA Champion), who is a member of staff that has a particular focus on understanding emotionally based barriers to attendance. However, most staff will have an understanding of how to best support you and your child to work through this difficulty and create a plan of support.

You can speak to the class teacher about any concerns which you or your child may have. There may be staff trained in emotional literacy support who are able to build a trusting relationship and gather your child's perspective. This can be done through gentle conversations, drawings, or short activities to find out:

- What helps them feel calm and safe?
- What feels difficult?
- What they would like teachers or friends to understand?
- What changes might make the school day feel easier?

How can I help?

You are the expert of your child within the home context and your insight is important as you can share patterns or triggers (e.g. mornings, transitions, subjects, or social situations). You can use some of the tools from the appendix of this document to help gather this information and share with school to help understand the full picture.

When both school and home work together, it adds another piece to the jigsaw puzzle and becomes easier to spot what's working and what might need adjusting.

Sometimes changes can be simple, such as:

- Allowing your child to start the day quietly in a familiar space
- Sitting near a friend or supportive peer
- Breaking tasks into smaller steps
- Offering movement or sensory breaks
- Adjustments to the learning environment

Having predictable routines especially around Sunday evenings and Monday mornings can also help. This can involve:

- Talking together about the week ahead in a calm, positive way
- Keeping bedtime routines regular and relaxed
- Preparing school bags and clothes the night before
- Planning something small to look forward to on Monday mornings (a favourite breakfast, listening to a favourite song on the way to school, walking with a friend).

Small, consistent steps like these can help children to begin the week feeling calmer and more settled and can make those first transitions back to school a little easier.

Talking and Supporting Your Child

This is a practical guide for helping children who may be experiencing worries around school. It focuses on building understanding, confidence, and coping skills through calm, supportive conversations.

The posters below introduce six simple strategies that parents can use when talking with their child.

Validate - Be Curious - Empower - Cope - Success - Distractor - Model

Each step helps your child feel heard, understood and supported, while also gradually building resilience and confidence.

Children may show their worries in many ways - worrying about parents, feeling physically tense, avoiding school, or seeming withdrawn. Using these strategies can help prevent worries from building and give your child tools to manage them.

How to use:

- Choose a quiet moment to talk with your child. Look for opportunities when you can chat to each other side by side (e.g. in the car or on a walk). *However, your child may not respond immediately and may need time to open up.*
- Use curious, open questions to understand how they are feeling
- Help your child notice what has worked for them before, and explore small steps to cope.
- Work together to set small, achievable goals so your child can experience success.
- Share what works with school staff so your child has consistent support

This approach will help turn conversations into a tool for connection, understanding, and skill-building, helping children and young people feel safer and confident when facing school-related worries.

Talk about feelings with your

Supporting your child's worries

Validate

Why?

- Makes your child feel understood
- Increases willingness to share
- Builds trust.



"I can hear that school feels really overwhelming for you right now. It makes sense that you'd feel this way, and I'm really glad you told me."

Curious

Why?

- Build a clearer picture of what the worry is about
- Reduces risk of worsening fears
- Supports your child to think about how they feel.



"Talk me through what happens for you when you get to school. What feels hardest at the beginning of the day? Is there anything that stands out to you when you arrive?"

Empower

Why?

- Builds confidence in their abilities
- Encourages independence over time
- Strengthens coping strategies.



"Lunchtime feels hard right now. What do you think could help you get through it? What's worked for you before, even a little?"

Cope

Why?

- Develops skills that support long term
- Builds emotional resilience
- Reduces fear and worries
- Increases sense of control



"We've practiced some ways to help when you're nervous. Shall we try one together and see how it feels?"

Talk about feelings with your children

Supporting your child's worries

Success

Why?

- Create positive experiences
- Builds belief in their own abilities
- Celebrating small steps towards their goal



"Do you remember how nervous you were when you wanted to go ___ and you gave it a go and enjoyed yourself?"

Distractor

Why?

- Prevent nerves from building up
- Feel more settled and ready to cope
- Helps manage how they respond to their feelings



"Going in the car can give your worries lots of space. What could we fill that time with to help your brain focus on something else?"

Model

Why?

- Positive example for your child
- Strengthens your confidence in supporting your child
- Helps normalise nerves and worries



"I'm feeling a bit worried right now. I'm going to take a few slow breaths and see if that helps my body settle."

Remember

It's not about fixing things, it's about listening to support your child to develop their own coping strategies. Being calm, curious, and consistent matters more than having the perfect response.

Tools

As mentioned previously it can be hard for a child or young person to explain the cause of their worries and hard for adults to know how to help.

The following tool can make those conversations easier and help to identify the push and pull factors. You don't have to use each tool - pick the one that feels suited to your child. If you and your child are happy, please share them with school as this will enable them to better understand your child's perspectives.

1. The Stress Bucket

This is a lovely visual tool which can help people understand how stressful things, however small, can fill our bucket over time - **risk/pull factors**.

It also helps us understand how **protective/push factors** like rest, listening to music or playing football can act as a tap that lets the stress out.

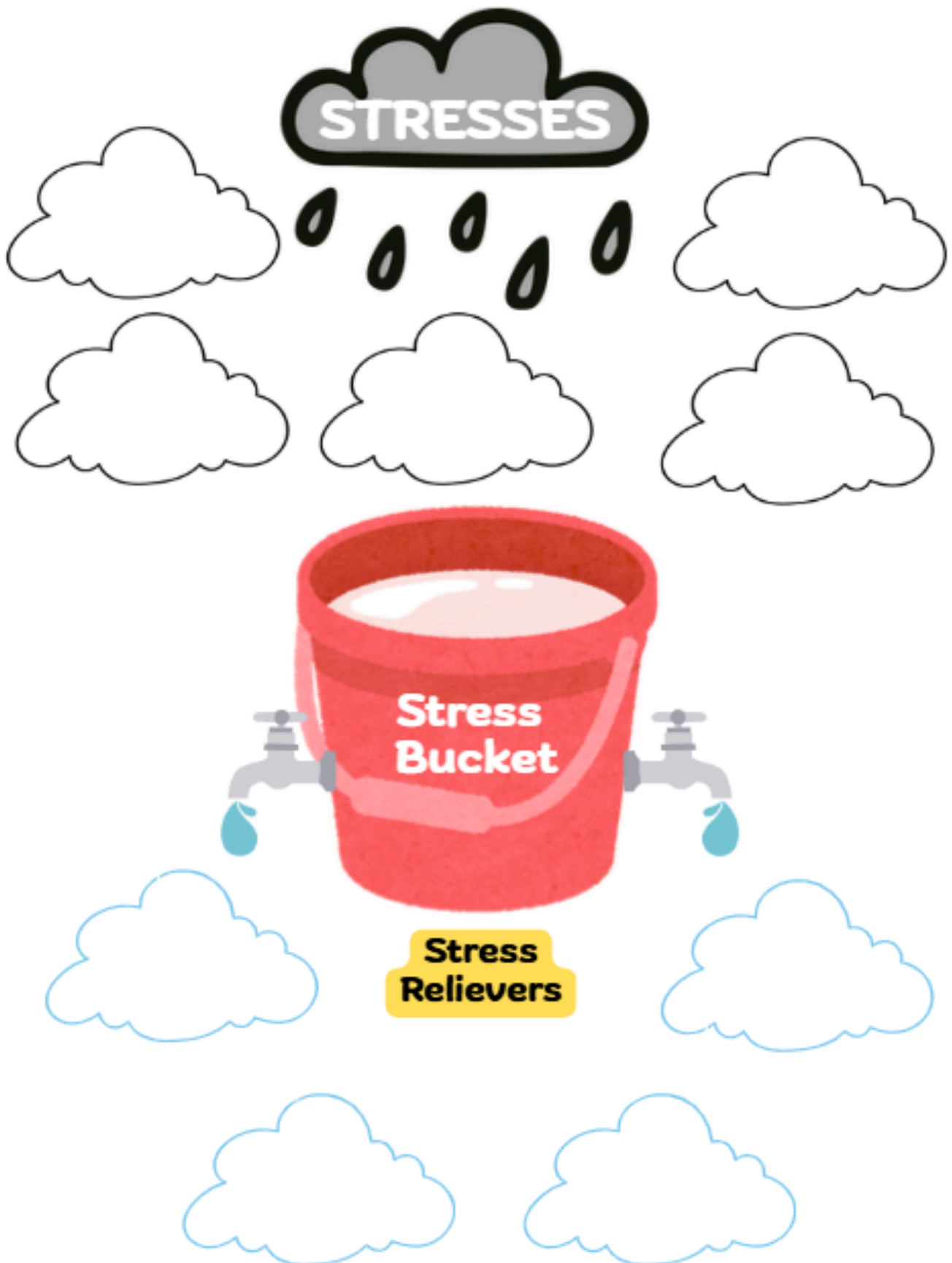
When the bucket overflows, children may show distress through physical symptoms, tears, or withdrawal.

How to use: Talk with your child about what fills and empties their bucket. You could draw it together or use pictures. Share with school so that they can help keep that bucket from overflowing during the school day.

Here is an example:



Template for using the Bucket:



2. The Circle of Control

The circle of control is a simple, practical tool to help children and young people manage worries in a calm and structured way. Some children worry about things they can't control (e.g. class size). The circle of control helps them to sort out whether a worry is something that they can personally do something about, with support or not, and which will allow them to think of how and when to take action (e.g. asking to sit in a preferred place within the class). If the worry is not something that they can control, the circle of control can help them to focus on the things that they can change.

How to use: When your child is ready, talk about the worry that your child has about school and explore it together using the template below. Your child can then write, draw or talk through their ideas with you.

What I can control

Things I can choose to do or change by myself.

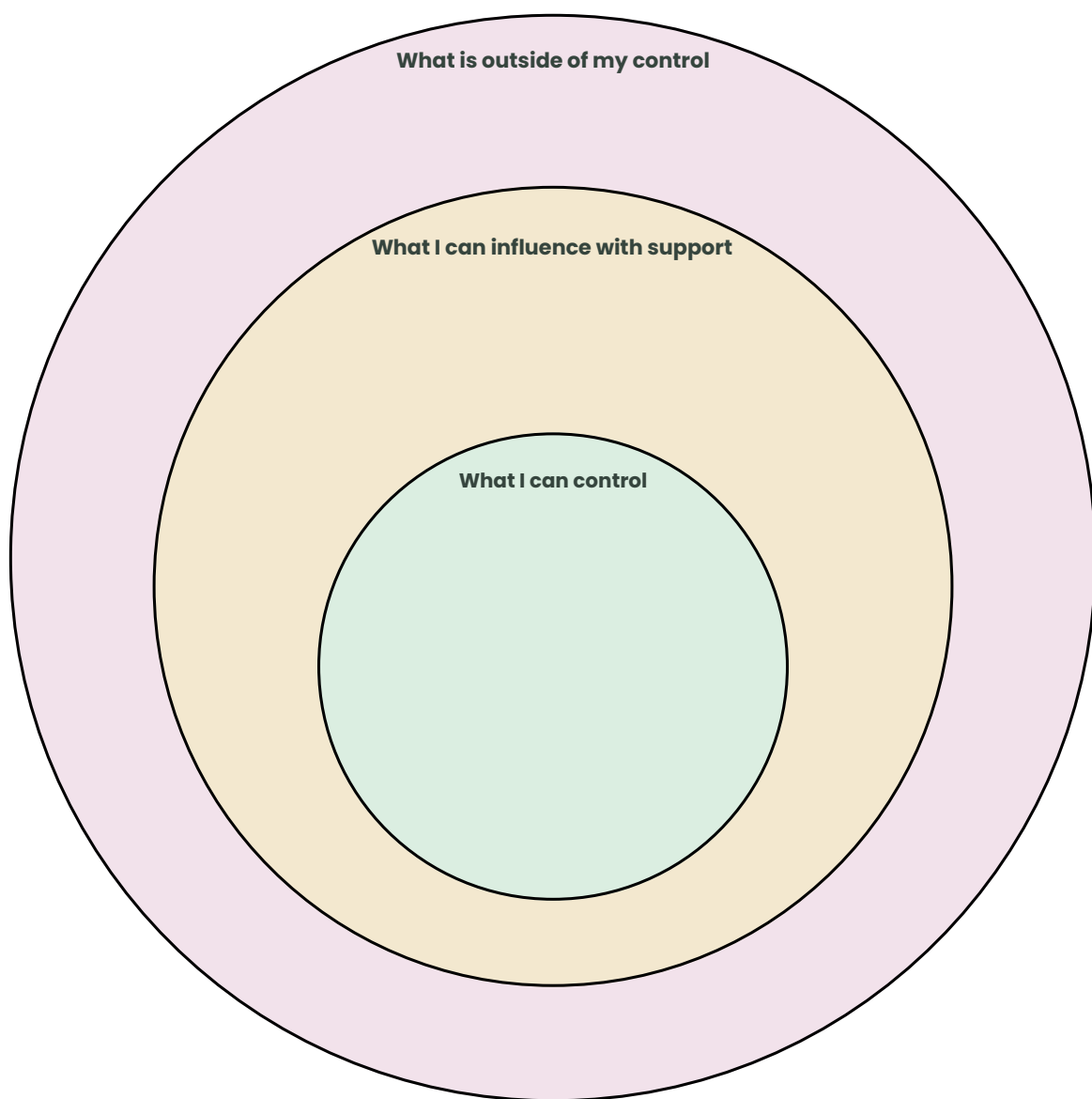
What I can influence

Things that might change if I ask for help or work with someone else.

What is outside of my control

Things I cannot change myself or that are not my responsibility to sort out.

Remember: Your child does not need to find a solution to every worry. Some difficulties need adults to listen, offer support or make changes.



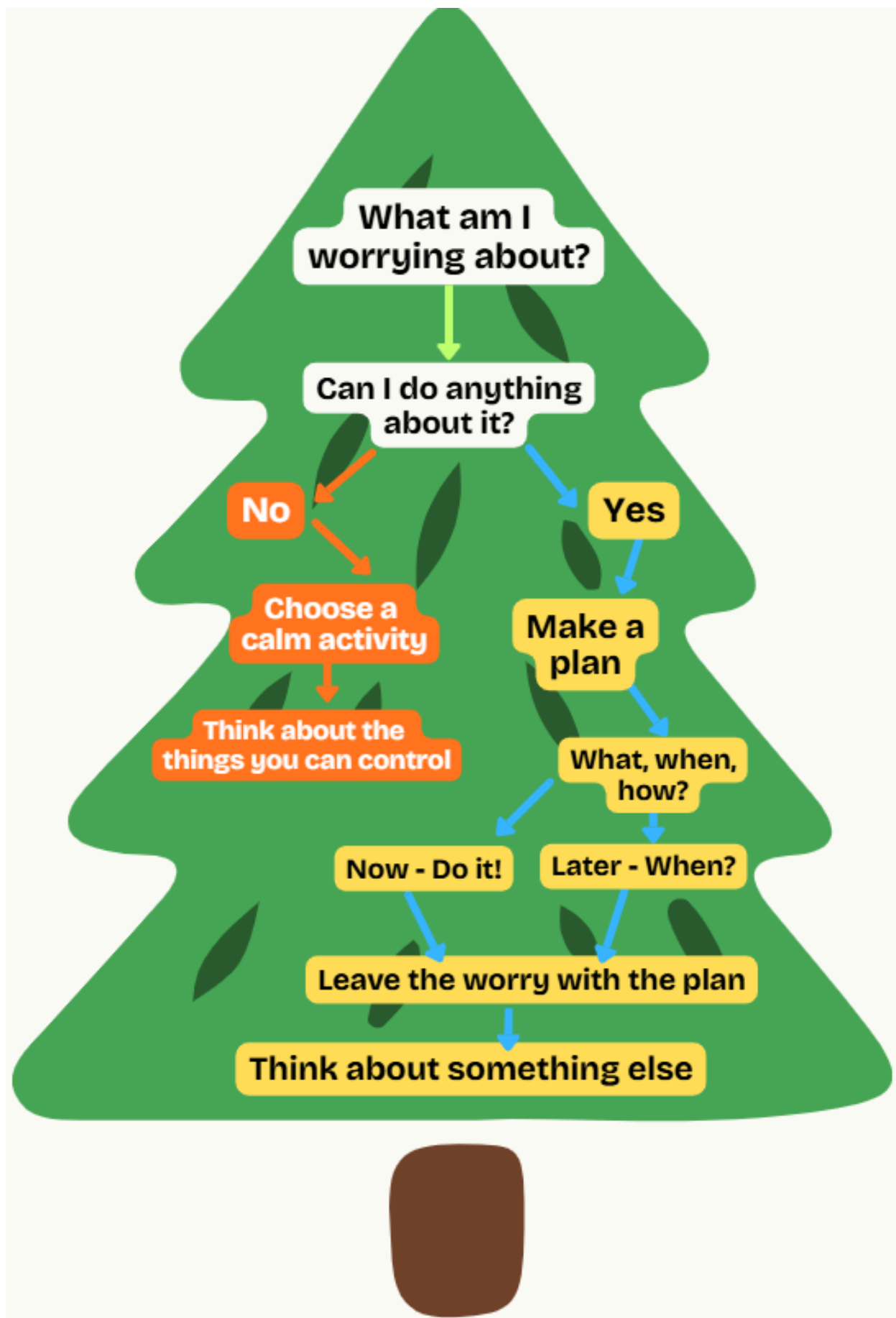
3. The Worry Tree

The Worry Tree is another resource that can help to break worries down into manageable steps, and stops the urge to avoid activities. This also helps children to learn problem-solving skills and coping strategies.

How to use

- Choose a calm moment to introduce the Worry Tree
- Work through the steps together at first, modelling calm thinking
- Keep plans small, realistic, and achievable
- Praise their efforts in thinking about a plan.

Used regularly, the Worry Tree can help children and young people develop confidence in managing worries, reduce avoidance, and feel safer and more capable when facing school-related worries.



Further sources for support



Welsh Government: [Parenting. Give it time. | GOV.WALES](#) Parenting give it time provides practical tips and advice for all your day to day parenting challenges.

Website: www.gov.wales/parenting-give-it-time



Anna Freud is a free website and network for parents and professional education workers who share practical and academic expertise about mental health and wellbeing in schools for. They have a range of great resources available including advice for parents and carers [Self-care for parents and carers](#) | [Anna Freud](#) and further resources [Resources](#) | [Anna Freud](#)

Website: www.annafreud.org

