

Emotional based school avoidance



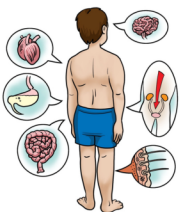
Information about why some children find it hard to go to school and some ideas to help them



This booklet is about Emotional Based School Avoidance (EBSA). It is for children, their parents/carers, and those that work with them.

Sarah Dove

Information



What is emotional based school avoidance?

Emotional Based School Avoidance (EBSA) is a term used to describe a situation where a student avoids attending school due to emotional and psychological difficulties. Some children with EBSA may get to school but find it hard to get to their lessons or stay in the classroom.

Some of the challenges in attending school can range from anxiety, depression, social phobias, or other emotional issues that make it difficult for the child to engage in regular school activities. Some children may have low self-esteem and feel worried about what others think about them. It may be that EBSA stems from bereavement or loss and worries about not being with family members. Others may have particular anxieties around things that are more likely to happen in school, for example, speaking in front of others or answering a question out loud. Additionally, some children may face sensory challenges, where the school environment can be overwhelming due to sensitivities to lights, sounds, or textures. Difficulties in forming relationships with peers can also contribute to EBSA. These challenges can result in a child's reluctance to attend school, impacting their educational and social development

This booklet aims to provide teachers, parents, and children with insights, strategies, and support to address EBSA and ensure that every child has the opportunity to thrive academically and emotionally.



What do some people call EBSA?

In many cases, you may have heard the term "school refusal" used to describe situations where a child avoids attending school. While this phrase is still used, it's important to recognise its limitations. "School refusal" implies a deliberate choice made by the child, which may not accurately represent the underlying issues that lead to emotional-based school avoidance (EBSA). It can inadvertently place blame on the child, suggesting that they are intentionally avoiding school when, in reality, they often grapple with complex emotional and psychological challenges that make attending school exceptionally challenging.

To foster a more empathetic and supportive understanding of EBSA, we encourage the use of terminology that emphasises the emotional and psychological aspects of the issue.

Instead of "school refusal," we advocate for terms like "Emotional Based School Avoidance (EBSA)," which better reflects the emotional and psychological factors at play and underscores the need for a compassionate and holistic approach to addressing these challenges. By doing so, we can shift the focus from assigning blame to providing the necessary support and solutions for children facing these difficulties.



How does EBSA affect people?

EBSA can erode a child's self-esteem who may internalise their struggles as personal failures, believing that they are not capable of handling school. This can lead to a negative self-image and a lack of confidence in their abilities.

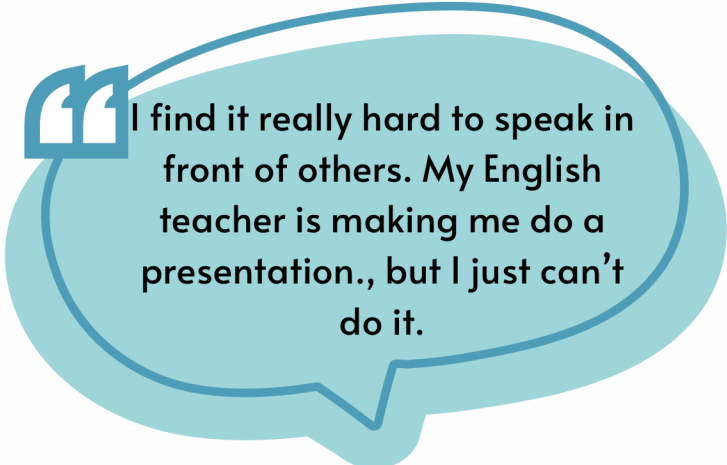
Children may also withdraw from social interactions with their peers, leading to a sense of loneliness and disconnection. The longer they stay away from school, the more they miss out on social experiences and friendships.

EBSA can make children feel like they don't belong in the school environment. They may perceive themselves as different or unable to fit in with their peers, exacerbating their sense of isolation and alienation.

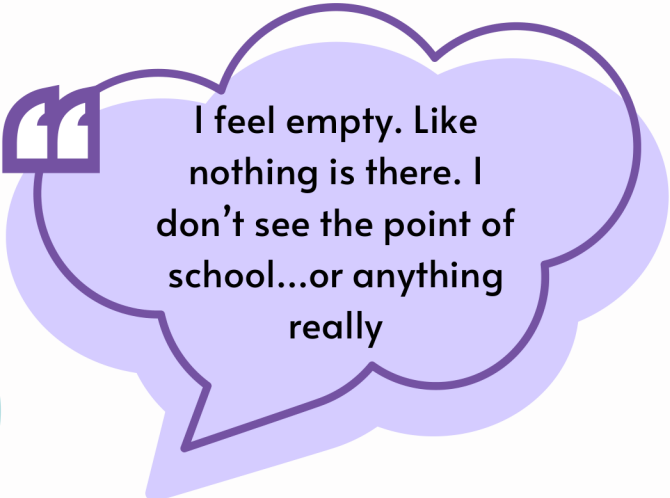
These children can worry about letting down their parents, teachers, and friends. They may feel a sense of guilt for not attending school.

EBSA can sometimes serve as a defence mechanism. In some cases, staying away from school may be their way of coping with overwhelming emotions, anxiety, or fear related to the school environment. It can become a way to protect themselves from situations they perceive as threatening or distressing.

It's essential for parents, teachers, and caregivers to understand these effects of EBSA and provide the support and resources to help children address their emotional and psychological challenges, rebuild their self-esteem, foster a sense of belonging, and ultimately reintegrate into the school environment in a healthy and supportive way.



I find it really hard to speak in front of others. My English teacher is making me do a presentation., but I just can't do it.



I feel empty. Like nothing is there. I don't see the point of school...or anything really

How does EBSA affect people?

Parents and carers often experience huge worries about their child's well-being and academic progress. They may be concerned about the emotional distress their child is facing and the long-term impact on their development.

EBSA can make it challenging for parents to balance the needs of the child with EBSA and their other children. Siblings may feel neglected or frustrated due to the attention and resources directed toward the child experiencing EBSA.

Parents may be apprehensive about punitive responses from schools or authorities. They might worry that their child will face disciplinary actions or blame for their absence, which can intensify their distress.

Parents and carers may feel uncertain about how to best support their child with EBSA. It can be a confusing and overwhelming situation, especially if they are unsure about the underlying causes and appropriate interventions.

Accessing support for children with EBSA can be a complex process. Parents may struggle to find the right resources, professionals, or services that can effectively address their child's emotional and psychological needs.

“He ended up being physically restrained to get him into school when anxiety was at its highest

From a parent of a child with EBSA



What are the underlying causes or triggers of EBSA?

There are lots of reasons why children may find it hard to go to school or may stop attending. These difficulties can be complex and overlap. It's good practice to have open conversations with the child and their family to understand their situation. Every child's experience is unique, and understanding their specific challenges is crucial. Talking to children and their families is an opportunity to explore these reasons together and work towards finding the right support and solutions.

Anxiety

Many children experience anxiety, which can make attending school challenging. Their worries and fears might become overwhelming.

Pathological Demand Avoidance

Children with a PDA profile may find the demands of school to be highly anxiety-provoking. They may have a strong need to resist these demands, which can lead to EBSA.

What are the underlying causes or triggers of EBSA?

Sensory challenges

Some children, particularly those with conditions like autism or sensory processing difficulties, may struggle with the sensory experiences in the school environment. This can affect their thoughts and feelings about attending.

PANDAS

In some cases, children who have experienced streptococcal infections may develop a condition known as PANDAS. This condition can lead to a range of symptoms, including Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), tics, and significant mood regulation challenges, all of which can impact their ability to attend school.

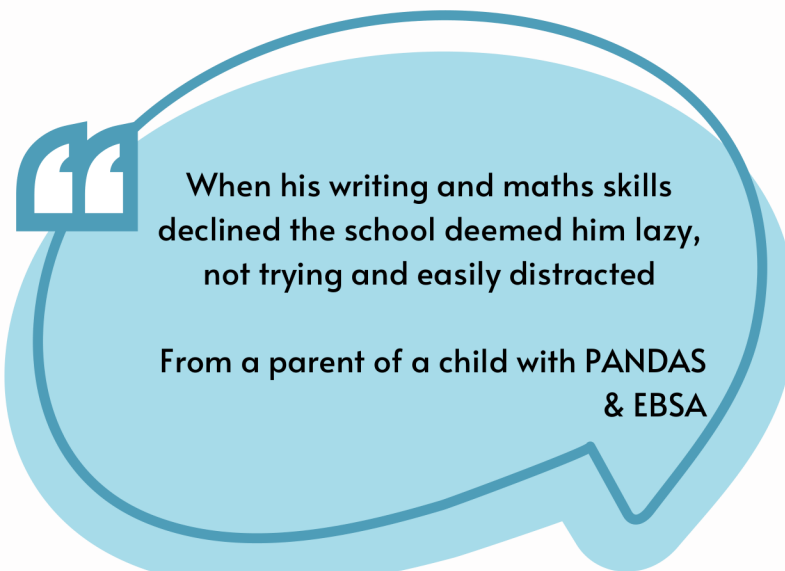
Understanding PANDAS & impact on school attendance

PANDAS, or Paediatric Autoimmune Neuropsychiatric Disorders Associated with Streptococcal Infections, can manifest in various ways, affecting children cognitively, physically, and emotionally.

Symptoms often include Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), tics, and significant challenges in mood regulation, among others. Notably, there have been instances where the onset of PANDAS has led to Emotional Based School Avoidance (EBSA) in affected children. For parents and caregivers dealing with PANDAS, obtaining support and identifying the specific needs of their child can be challenging.


Unlike some other conditions, PANDAS might not always be immediately recognised, making it crucial for parents to advocate for their child's unique circumstances. One of the key factors in addressing PANDAS is early recognition.

Understanding the breadth of its impacts is essential, as PANDAS can sometimes result in a regression of skills, both cognitive and emotional. Recognising the psychological toll on a child or young person is equally crucial. Many parents and caregivers have reported struggles in obtaining the right support and identification of needs for their child dealing with PANDAS.



When his writing and maths skills declined the school deemed him lazy, not trying and easily distracted

From a parent of a child with PANDAS & EBSA



School didn't understand how needs can just develop

From a parent of a child with PANDAS & EBSA

Understanding PANDAS & impact on school attendance

The single most important aspect is acknowledging the condition and its potential severity. This recognition is vital in preventing unintended consequences, such as misinterpreting symptoms and inadvertently forcing a child to attend school during a severe flare-up. The impact of such misinterpretation can be devastating, affecting a child's attendance and straining their relationship with school.

In supporting a child with PANDAS, it's paramount to prioritise long-term positive engagement with education. This involves following medical guidance, understanding the potential fluctuations in symptoms, and working collaboratively with healthcare professionals and educators to ensure the child receives the appropriate support. By recognising and addressing the unique challenges posed by PANDAS, we can create an environment that fosters the well-being and educational success of every child affected by this condition.

PANDA checklist for schools

- ☐ Undertaken staff training
- ☐ Consulted with medical professional about the range of symptoms
- ☐ Consulted with medical professional about the ways in which symptoms may fluctuate
- ☐ Looked at different strategies within school to support a child with PANDAS
- ☐ Developed an Individual Health Care Plan with parents/carers, child, medical professional and other relevant people
- ☐ Informed relevant members of staff about the child's condition
- ☐ Have consistent strategy to communicate with home
- ☐ Checked in with siblings



Understanding sensory needs & impact on school attendance

Sensory needs play a significant role in the experiences of children dealing with Emotional Based School Avoidance (EBSA). For some, the school environment can be overwhelming due to heightened sensitivities to lights and sounds. Understanding these sensitivities and implementing effective strategies is crucial in creating a supportive and inclusive space for these students.

Sensitivity to sounds can be a significant factor. Loud noises, constant background noise, or sudden, unexpected sounds can create a stressful environment for some children. This heightened sensitivity might contribute to their reluctance to attend school.

Sounds

Some children with sensory challenges may be hypersensitive to certain fabrics used in school uniforms. Scratchy, itchy, or restrictive materials can evoke discomfort and distress. Uniforms often have seams, tags, or labels that may cause irritation.

Textures

Children with sensory sensitivities may find certain lighting conditions distressing. Fluorescent lights, flickering lights, or excessively bright lighting can contribute to feelings of discomfort, anxiety, or even physical pain. In extreme cases, these sensory challenges may lead to EBSA.

Lights

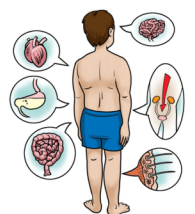
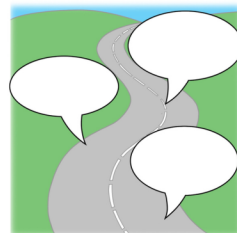
Understanding sensory needs & impact on school attendance

Sensory checklist for schools

- ☐ Are there options for adjustable lighting in classrooms or areas where students spend significant time?
- ☐ Are there designated quiet spaces equipped with comfortable seating and minimal sensory stimuli?
- ☐ Have noise reduction measures been implemented in classrooms and common areas?
- ☐ Is there a system in place for providing structured breaks for students with sensory sensitivities?
- ☐ Have individualised plans been created for students with known sensory needs, with input from parents, caregivers, and professionals?
- ☐ Have school staff received training on recognizing and addressing sensory needs in students?
- ☐ Is there open communication with parents and caregivers regarding a child's sensory needs, and are strategies consistently applied at home and school?



Practical strategies for schools



What might be helpful at school?

Have a look at some of things that other children have said helps them.

Do you think some of these things would be helpful?

Put a tick in the box if your school already does this.



A one-page profile offers a concise, personalised view of a child's needs, strengths, and preferences. In just one page, it becomes a powerful tool, enhancing understanding among teachers, parents, and peers. This snapshot fosters targeted support, creating an inclusive environment that nurtures the child's well-being and academic success.

☐

I started by just driving to the school. I didn't have to go in. I did that for a few weeks until I planned to go in to cook with a teaching assistant. My mum stayed in another room. I then met my friends before cooking. I started to go in more but still find it hard

☐

I hadn't been to school for a while, and someone said about a robot that would go to school and I'd use a tablet to control it from home. It meant I could virtually go to school, start talking to people and go into lessons. It was great seeing my work on the walls. It took a few months but I've started to go into school in real life.

☐

Soft-landing

Just like when you're about to take a big jump on a trampoline, starting your day at school can feel like a big leap. Imagine bouncing on a trampoline - you wouldn't want to jump right into a somersault without a warm-up. The same goes for your school day. Instead of being pushed straight into the classroom, you can have a "soft landing" to ease into your day.

A soft landing is like having a gentle start to your school day, so you can be ready to learn and have a great time. It's like starting your trampoline jump with a few small bounces before going for the big ones. Here are some ideas for your soft landing at school:

These soft landings help you ease into your school day, just as you'd start with gentle bounces on a trampoline before doing somersaults or high jumps. They give you a chance to feel ready, happy, and excited about the adventures waiting for you at school.

How about meeting a friend before school or just at the start and playing a fun game to wake up your brain and have some excitement?

Game time

You can begin your day with a breakfast you enjoy, like warm toast with your favourite topping.

Toast Time



Reading a book for a little while can be your soft landing. Just like taking a moment to catch your breath and enjoy the trampoline's gentle rhythm.

Book break

Creating a Personal Plan Together

Returning to school can bring up many thoughts and feelings, such as concerns about friends, schoolwork, or other things. It's important for you, your child, and their key adult at school to work together as a team. Here's how you can do it:

Remember, creating a plan is all about teamwork. It's a way for you and your child to work together with the school to make going back to school a bit easier. Your child's plan should make them feel confident, safe, and ready to take on the day!

Sit down with your child and ask them how they're feeling about going back to school. Let them know it's okay to share their thoughts and worries. Listen carefully to what they say.

Talk and share

You can make a list of their thoughts and feelings. For example, they might be worried about making new friends, finding schoolwork difficult, or missing you during the day.

Write it down

Use what your child shared to create a plan. The plan is all about them! It should make them feel in control and confident. You, your child, and their key adult at school can design the plan as a team.

Plan together

Alex's plan included talking to the teacher about making new friends, getting extra help with schoolwork, and having a photo of their family in their bag to feel close during the day.

Example plan

School Journey Road Map

- **Checkpoints:** Create checkpoints on your map to mark your progress. Celebrate small victories along the way. Did you face a fear or make a new friend? These are your checkpoints.
- **Revisiting:** Remember, it's okay to go back on your journey. If you miss something or find a new way that works better for you, you can always revisit and update your map.
- **Support Team:** Identify the people who are part of your support team. This could be your family, friends, or a special adult at school. They are there to help you on your journey.
- **Self-Care Stops:** Just like rest stops on a long road trip, plan moments for self-care. These are times to take a break, relax, and do something you enjoy.
- **Rewards:** Plan rewards for yourself when you reach certain points on your map. It could be a small treat or a fun activity as a way to acknowledge your progress.

Remember, your School Journey Road Map is unique to you. It's a tool to help you navigate the adventure of going to school and feeling good about it. Feel free to draw your map, add colours, and make it as creative as you like!



Listening to your body

Heart

Anxiety and stress related to school avoidance can cause the child's heart to beat faster. This is a physiological response to the emotional distress they're feeling.

Stomach

The child may frequently complain of stomachaches or describe feeling butterflies in their stomach. These physical sensations are often associated with anxiety and emotional distress.

Bowels and bladder

They may experience a need to urinate or have bowel movements more frequently, or even have loose bowel movements due to stress.

Skin

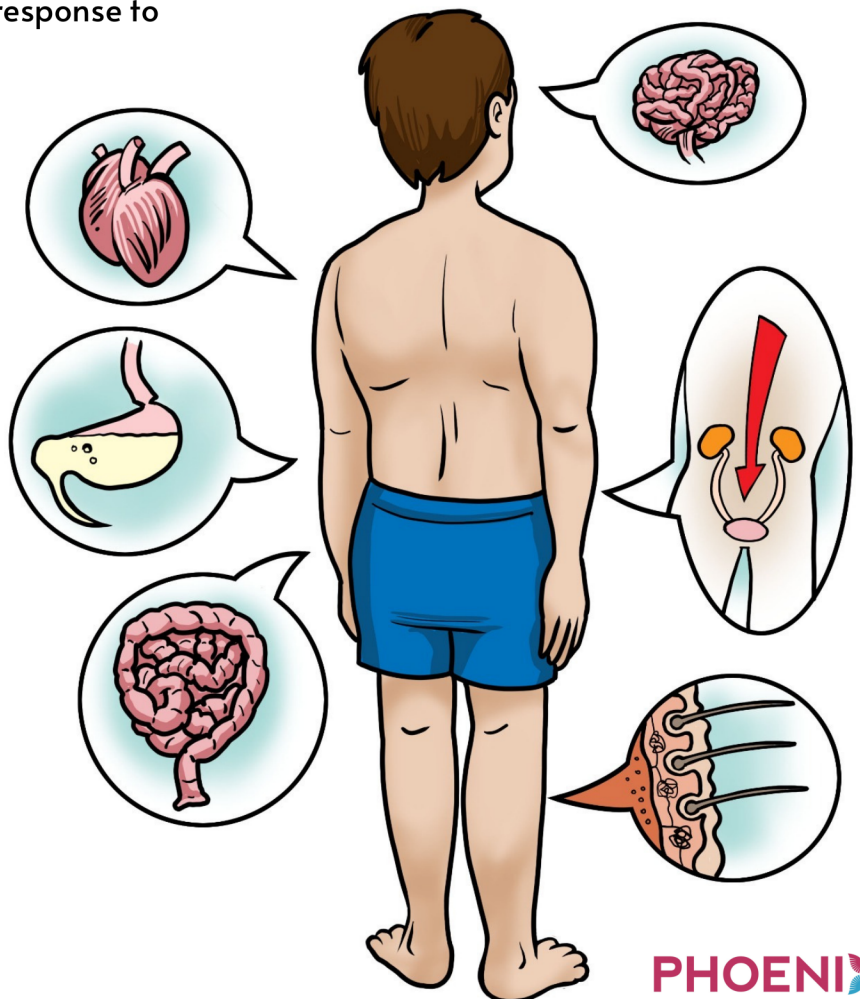
Increased stress and anxiety may lead to sweaty or clammy skin. It's a common physical response to heightened emotional states.

Brain

If you are worrying a lot you might find it hard to get to sleep, or even to eat. This can all have an impact on your ability to concentrate.

Head

The child may experience recurrent or persistent headaches as a result of the stress and anxiety they feel.



Likert scales



A Likert scale is a commonly used rating scale that measures the level of agreement or disagreement with a statement or the intensity of a feeling or opinion. It typically consists of a series of items or statements with response options that allow individuals to express their level of agreement or disagreement. A standard Likert scale typically ranges from 1 to 5 or more points. Here's a description of a 1-5 Likert scale for EBSA that you might want to adapt for your own specific needs.

1. Not Anxious My anxiety is minimal, and they feel relatively calm and composed.
2. Slightly Anxious: I am experiencing some anxiety, but it is manageable and it won't significantly disrupt my day .
3. Moderately Anxious: My feelings of anxiety is noticeable and may affect my daily functioning to some extent.
4. Quite Anxious The child's anxiety related to EBSA is pronounced and often interferes with their daily activities and well-being.
5. Very Anxious : My anxiety is severe, overwhelming, and is having a significant negative impact on my day and feelings



Feelings journal

Imagine your very own diary where you can share your feelings and thoughts about school, EBSA, and everything that's on your mind. This special journal is just for you, and it can be a helpful tool to make you feel better. Here are some fun ideas to get you started

Your feelings journal is a safe space where you can be yourself. It's a great way to show your parents or teacher how you're feeling, and it can also be a fun way to express your thoughts about school and EBSA. You don't have to write every day; just do it when you feel like it. Remember, your feelings are important, and it's okay to talk about them!

Draw your feelings

If you don't feel like writing, draw pictures that show how you're feeling. Use colours, shapes, and doodles to express yourself.

Emoji Mood Chart

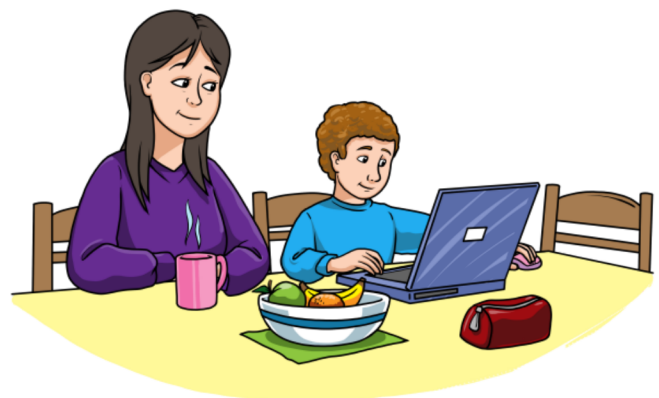
Create a little chart with different emojis to represent your mood each day. Which emoji best describes how you feel about school?

Dreams and wishes

Share your dreams and wishes for a happy school experience. What would you like school to be like?

My champions

Make a list of the people who support you - your parents, teacher, friends, or even a pet. How do they make you feel better?



One page profile

My name

What I look like

Things I'm really good at

I like it best when...

Things that make me worried are

What I want you to know

The things that help me are

Resources that help me

What others that know me well think

Feelings journal – being curious!

Each day, think about how you're feeling about school.

- Use a scale to rate your feelings from 1 to 5: 1 – Not Anxious (I feel okay) 2 – Slightly Anxious (I'm a little worried) 3 – Moderately Anxious (I'm somewhat anxious) 4 – Quite Anxious (I'm pretty worried) 5 – Very Anxious (I feel really anxious)
- Draw a little face or write the number on each day to show your mood. For example, if you feel just a little worried, put a "2" or draw a small frowning face.
- At the end of the week, see how your mood changed. Did some days make you feel better or worse? What can you learn from this?
- You can share this diary with your parents, teacher, or a trusted adult to help them understand how you're feeling. They want to help you and make things better.
- Remember, it's okay to have different feelings, and it's important to talk about them. Your diary is your space to express yourself.

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat

Esme's story

Welcome to Esme's world, a place where feelings are real, challenges are faced, and support makes all the difference. In this section, we'll dive into Esme's journey, a story that might resonate with some of our young friends who are facing their own unique adventures.

Esme's story is more than just pictures; it's a narrative of courage, growth, and finding the right support. As you explore each snapshot, consider the emotions and experiences Esme goes through—perhaps you'll find a piece of your own story in hers'.

How children can use this

For our young readers, Esme's story is a friend who understands. Read through the pictures and words, and let Esme's journey spark conversations. What makes you feel like the butterflies in Esme's tummy? What makes you feel settled, like Esme in the last picture? Use this as a tool to express your feelings, knowing that it's okay to have butterflies sometimes.

How parents/carers can use this

This is an opportunity to connect with your child. Esme's story can be a conversation starter. Ask your child about their feelings, worries, and joys. Share the story together, and maybe you'll discover new ways to support each other.

How teachers can use this

Esme's story opens a window into the emotional world of some of your students. Use this as a resource to understand their perspectives. Consider having discussions in class about feelings and challenges. Create a safe space where students can share their thoughts, and let Esme's journey guide your conversations.



Esme's story



This is me, Esme. In this picture, you might see a bunch of fluttering butterflies in my tummy. Those butterflies are like little messengers telling me that something is making me anxious. Back then, I felt those butterflies a lot, especially when I thought about going to school.

But then, there's this picture. See me holding that football? That's because I love football. When I'm on the field, the butterflies take a break, and I just play and have fun. It's like a little escape where I don't have the same worries.



Now, this one is a bit trickier. That's me in class, and honestly, sometimes I felt lost. The work seemed like a puzzle I couldn't solve, and it made my butterflies flap even more. I just didn't know what was happening, and it was tough.

In the next picture, you can see me, my mum and dad, and the head teacher. We had a talk about what was going on. It was kind of like connecting the puzzle pieces together. My parents were there, my head teacher was there, and we started figuring things out.



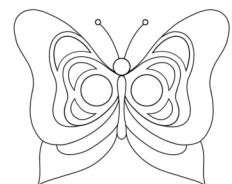
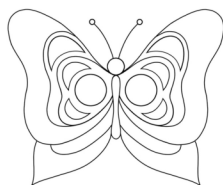
Esme's story



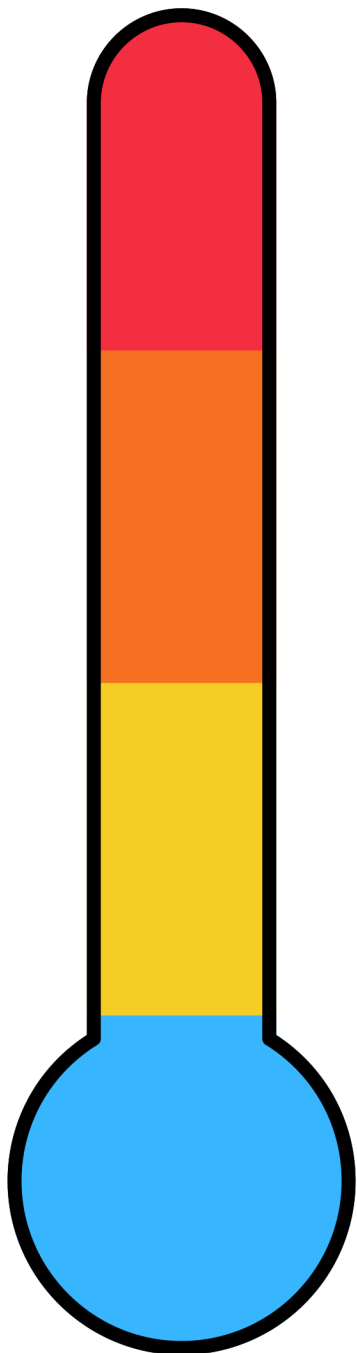
And finally, the last picture. It's like a sigh of relief. We found the support we needed. With everyone working together, we found ways to make things better. Now, in class, I still have work to do, but it doesn't feel as hard. I feel more settled, and the butterflies aren't fluttering so much.

Activities from Esme's story

- Draw your butterflies - create a drawing of butterflies in your tummy. Use different colours to represent different feelings
- Your favourite activity - draw a picture or write about your favourite activity that makes you feel happy and confident
- Expressing confusions - draw a picture or write about a time when you felt confused, just like Esme in class. What did it look like for you?
- Meeting with your Head Teacher - imagine you're having a meeting with someone who can help you make decisions about school. It could be a teacher, parent or a friend. Draw a picture or write about what you would like to talk about.
- Your support - Draw a picture of a supportive figure in your life—a person, a pet, or even an imaginary friend. Write about how they make you feel supported.



Emotional Thermometer



An emotional thermometer as a tool to help children and staff express and understand their emotions. Just like a physical thermometer measures body temperature, the Emotional Thermometer measures how someone is feeling on the inside.

Divide the thermometer into different temperature zones or colour-coded sections to represent a range of emotions. For example:

- Cool/Calm Zone: Relaxed, content, happy.
- Warm Zone: Excited, interested, a bit anxious.
- Hot Zone: Frustrated, upset, overwhelmed.

Encourage individuals to self-reflect regularly by pointing to the zone on the Emotional Thermometer that represents their current feelings. This can be a quick and non-verbal way for children and staff to communicate their emotional state.. Teach children and staff to use the Emotional Thermometer as a communication tool. For example: If a child points to the "Hot Zone," it signals a need for support or a break. If a staff member notices a child in the "Cool/Calm Zone," it indicates positive emotional well-being.

Incorporate regular check-ins where individuals use the Emotional Thermometer to express how they are feeling at a given moment. This can be done individually or in group settings to create an environment of open communication.

Create interactive activities where children can personalise their Emotional Thermometers. For instance: draw or paste pictures representing emotions in each zone or write or draw things that help them move from a "Hot" to a "Cool" zone.

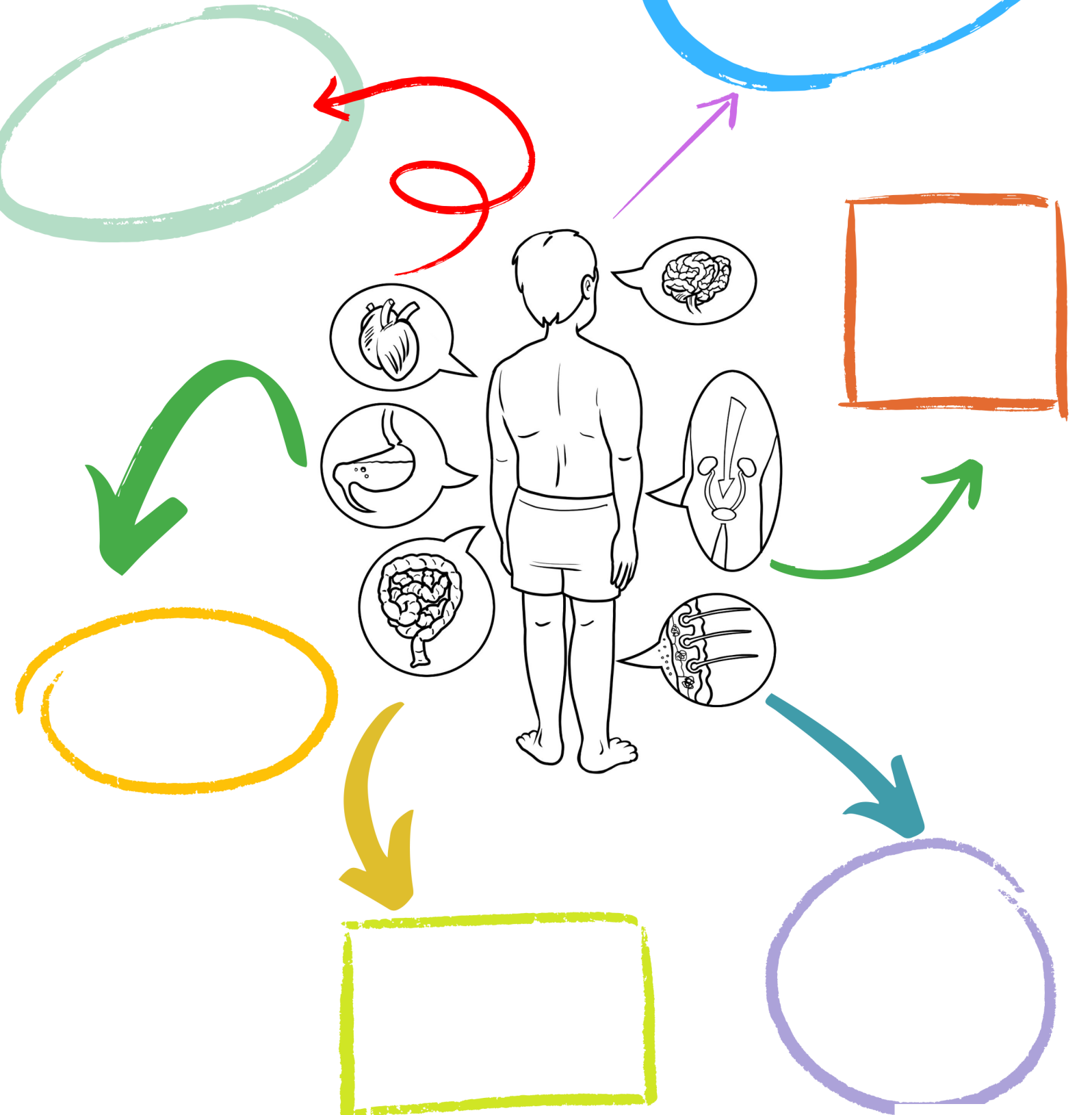
Encourage children to track their emotional temperature over time. This can help identify patterns, triggers, and progress in emotional regulation. Staff can also use this tool to observe trends and tailor support accordingly.



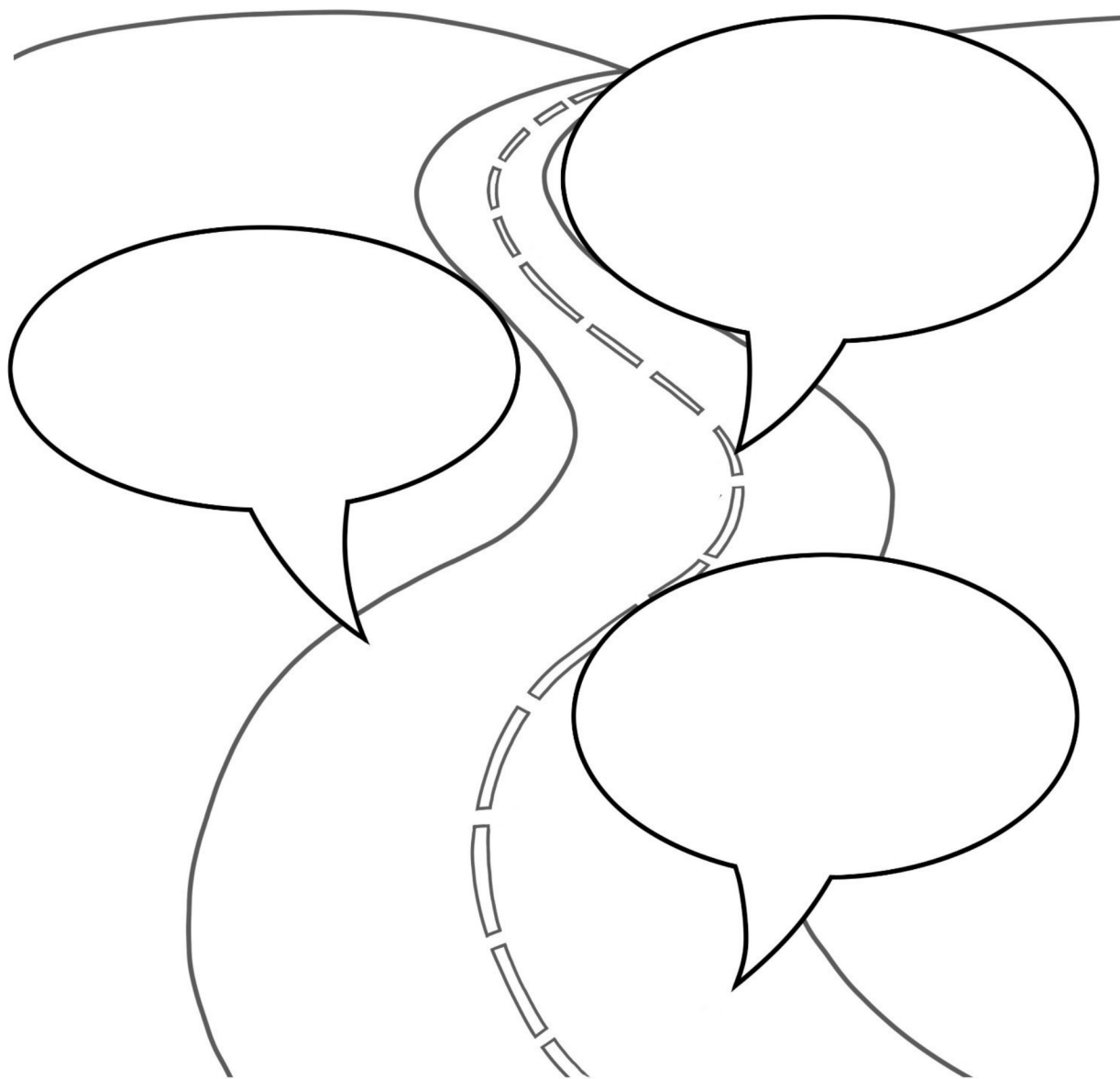
1	Not anxious	I feel calm
2	Slightly anxious	I have some anxiety, but it's manageable and it won't significantly disrupt my day
3	Moderately anxious	My feelings of anxiety is noticeable and may affect my daily functioning to some extent.
4	Quite anxious	My anxiety is making things really difficult and is interfering with my daily activities and well-being.
5	Very anxious	My anxiety is making things really difficult and is interfering with my daily activities and well-being.

Worries and your body

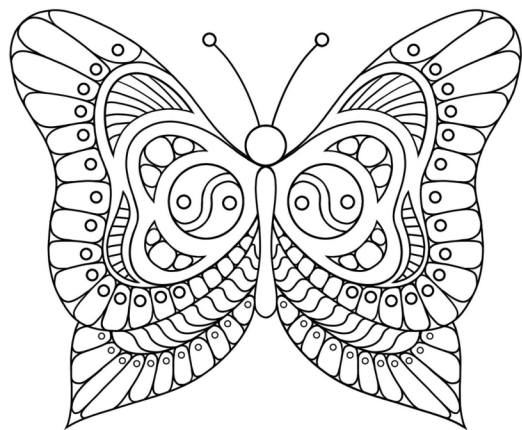
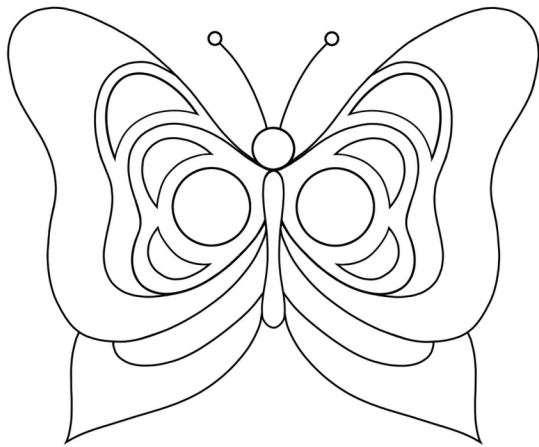
I find it hard to sleep the night before school



Your own road map



Draw your butterflies



Esme's story

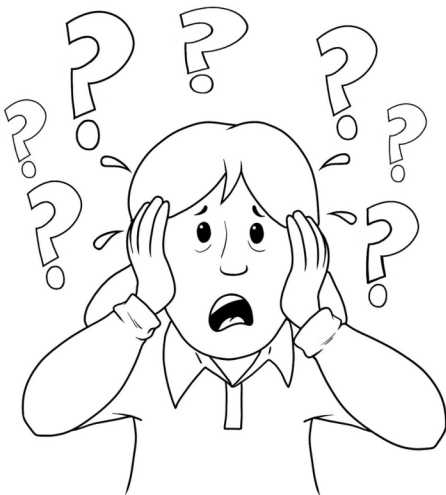
Esme loves football but finds school really difficult.

Can you relate to some of her feelings?

Do you like something different that you want to tell someone about?



Things I am really good at

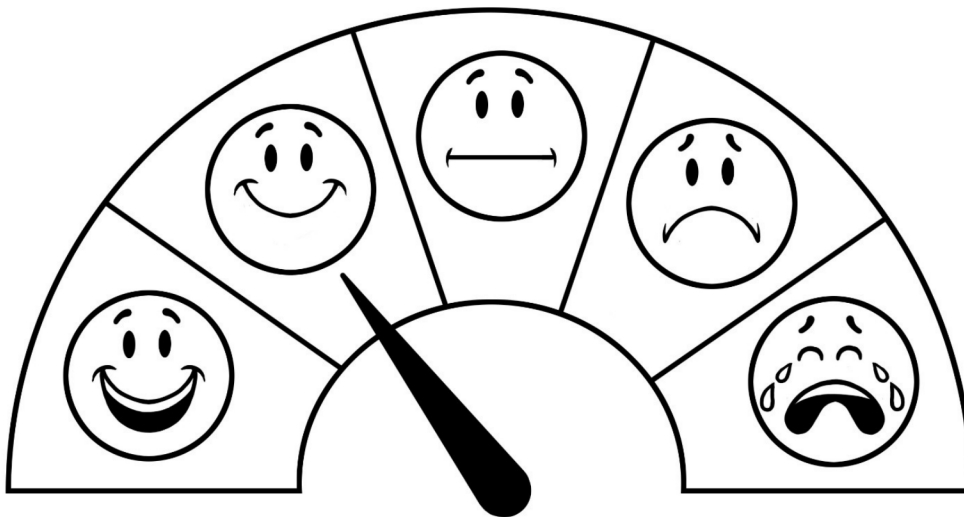
A large, empty square box with a thick black border, intended for a student to write down things they are good at.

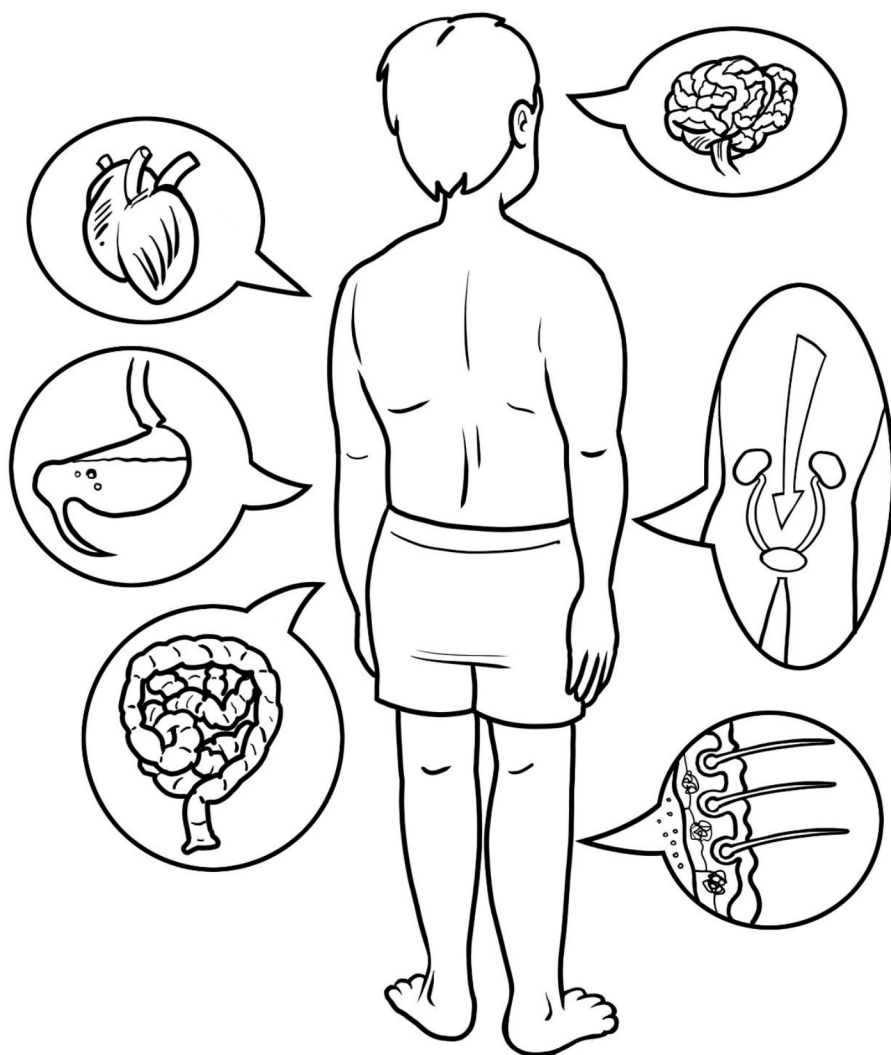
Things that I find hard

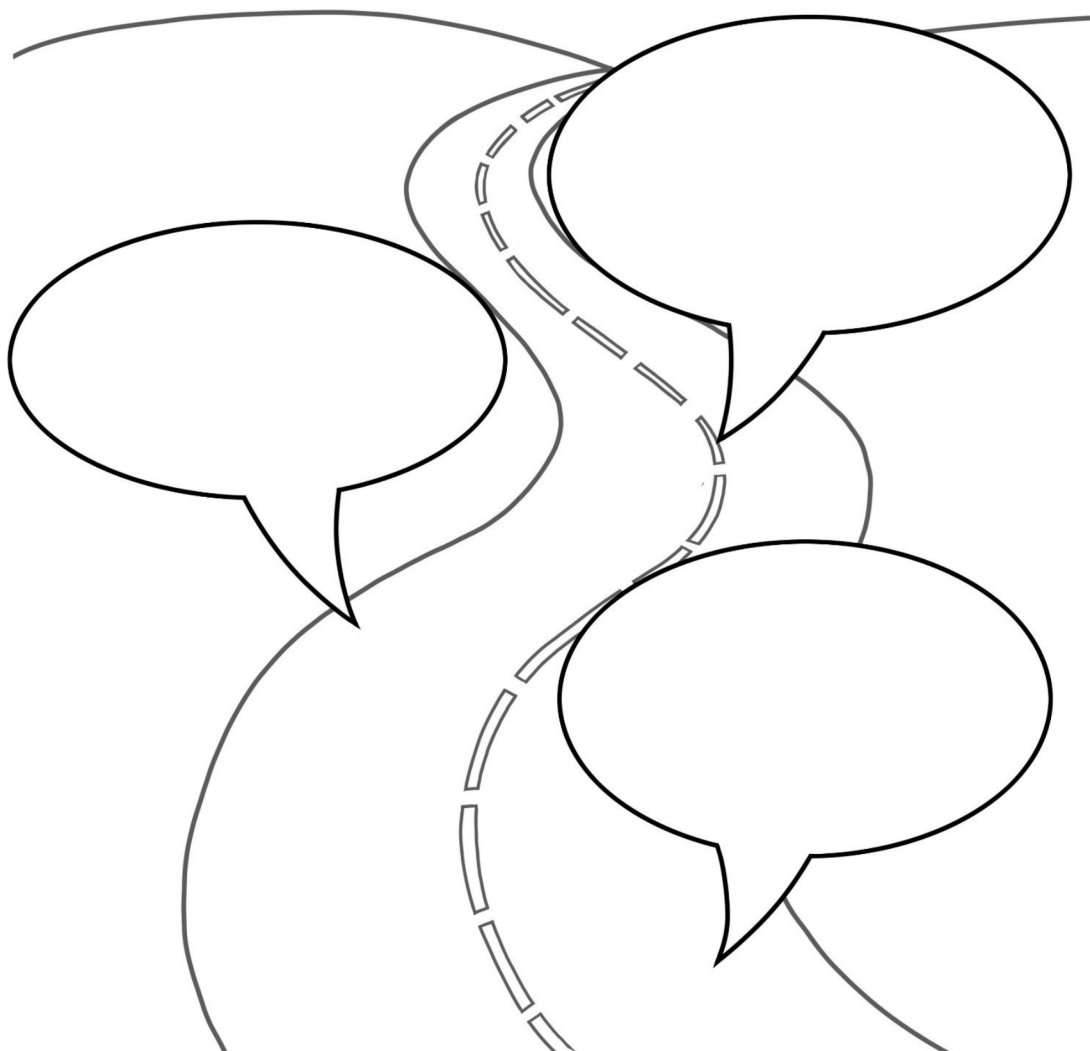
A large, empty square box with a thick black border, intended for a student to write down things they find difficult.

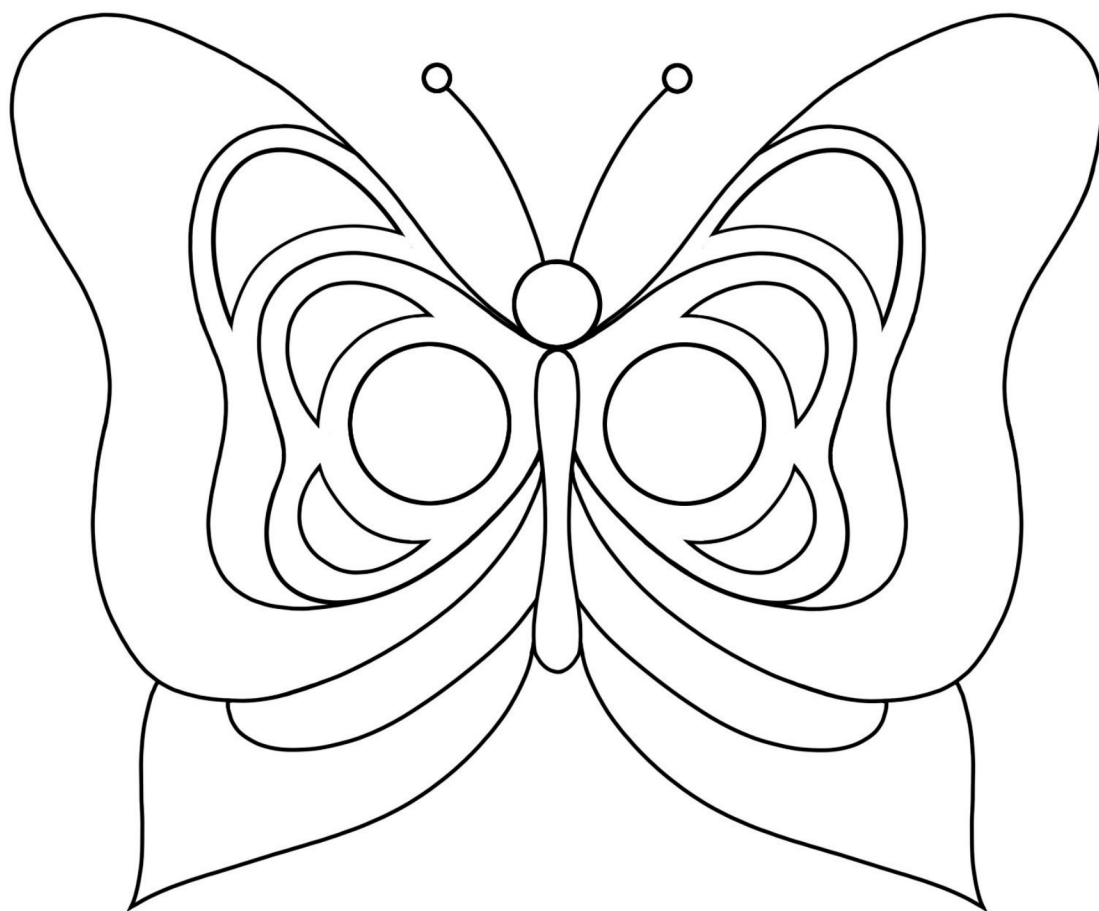
Printables

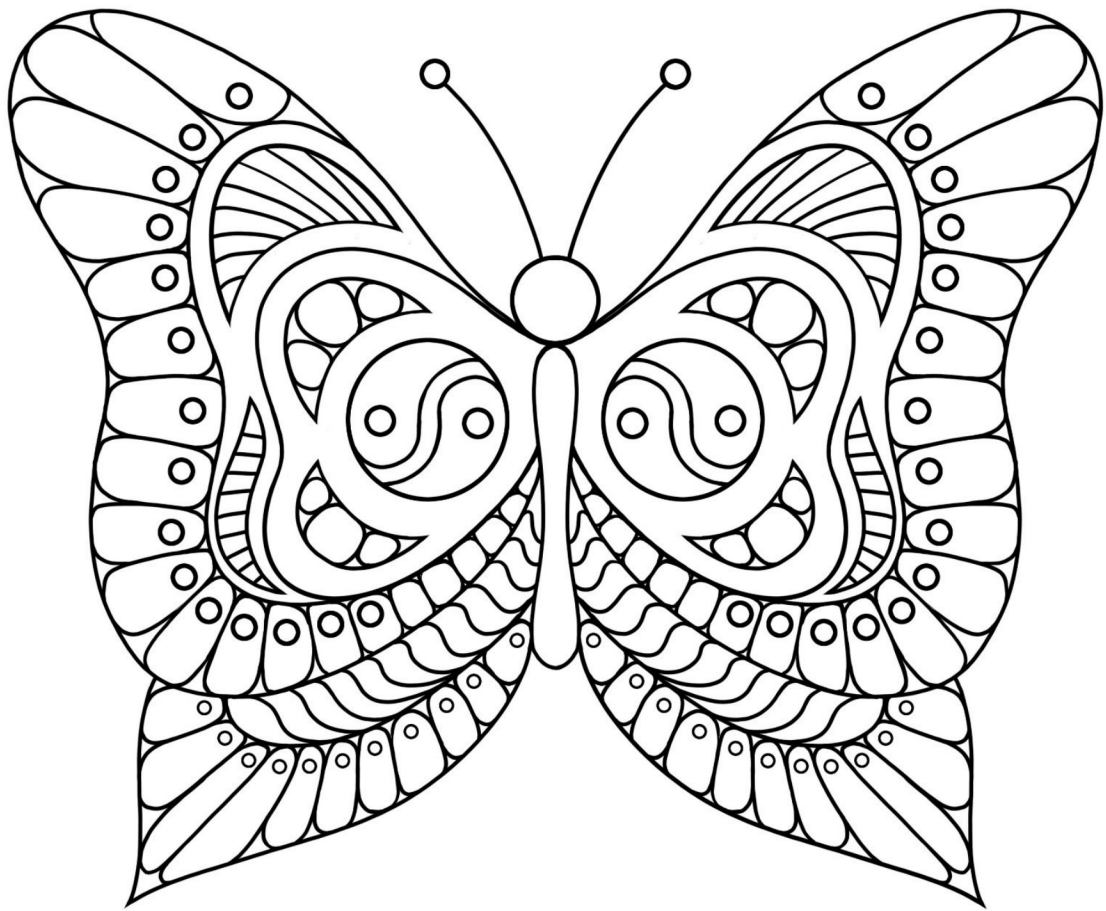






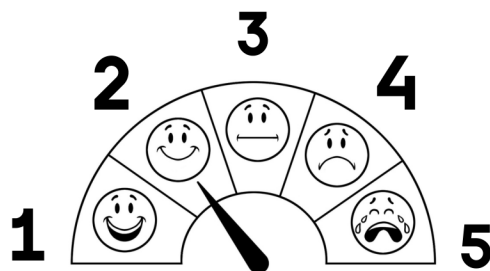




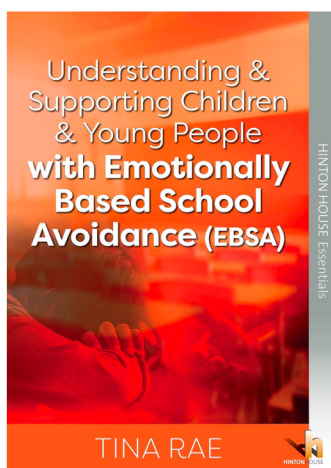
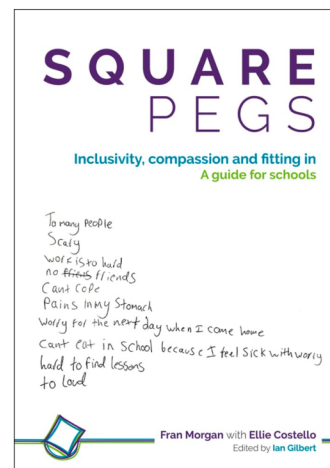
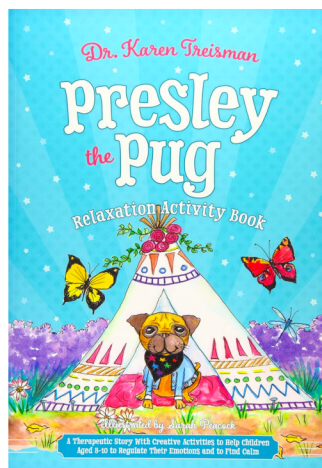
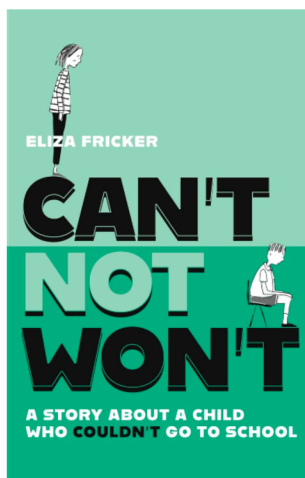
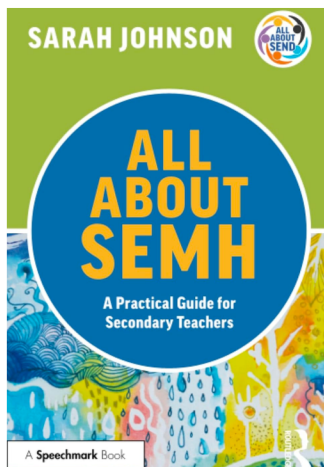
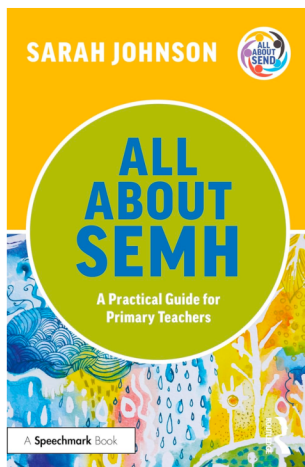


weekly

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Other resources



Websites that you might find helpful

Not Fine in School

<https://notfineinschool.co.uk/>

Dr Tina Rae's youtube channel

www.youtube.com/c/drtinarae

Dr Pooky Knight-Smith

www.youtube.com/@PookyH

PANS PANDAS UK

www.panspandasuk.org

No Isolation

www.noisolation.com

SEDS Connective

www.sedsconnective.org