



Nova is a Youth Mental Health Programme. The name 'Nova' means new star, and the name was born out of an idea from the project's Youth Advisory Group. The Nova programme focuses on examining and developing a multilayered approach to working with Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA). Throughout our Toolkit we have simplified the terminology used throughout to 'school avoidance'.

The Nova programme is aimed at schools, parents and young people and it is being coordinated by CDI in conjunction with several local and national stakeholders.

Who is the Toolkit for?

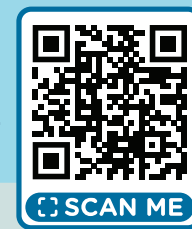
- Existing teachers and school staff in Dublin 24
- Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs)
- Staff new to Dublin 24
- Youth workers
- Parents

If you are interested in further information on our Toolkit, please visit our website.

The Childhood Development Initiative  
St. Mark's Family and Youth Centre  
Cookstown Lane, Fettercairn, Tallaght,  
Dublin D24 PK6P

Tel: 01 494 0030  
Email: [info@cdi.ie](mailto:info@cdi.ie)  
Web: [www.cdi.ie](http://www.cdi.ie)  
CRA 20065577

SCAN HERE TO VISIT THE TOOLKIT



FOLLOW US

## Autistic Anxiety

School avoidance is a significant issue within the neurodivergent population. Studies indicate that a substantial percentage of children struggling with school attendance are autistic. Anxiety may present as slightly different in those children and young people who are autistic. Some of the presentations of anxiety in children and young people with autism are listed in the diagram. Further information on autism and anxiety is available by scanning here.



**GOOD PRACTICE TIP:** To support a child with autism effectively, start by building an anxiety profile. Identify what their anxiety looks like and sounds like, and the major triggers and symptoms they experience. Use this profile to guide proactive strategies, such as predictable routines, flexible accommodations, and supportive conversations.

**GOOD PRACTICE TIP:** Focus on reducing pressure rather than increasing it, co-creating approaches with the child that prioritise emotional safety and trust.



## A Graduated Approach to School Avoidance

Nova adopts a graduated approach when intervening in school avoidance before cases are referred to Tusla Educational Support Services (TESS). A graduated approach expects settings and schools to make full use of all their resources and expertise before accessing increasingly personalised support. It is a recognised and continuous cycle of assessing needs, planning to meet those needs, implementing those plans, reviewing their effectiveness, and adjusting as required. Remember, early intervention is crucial. The longer school avoidance remains an issue for a child or young person, the more it reduces the likelihood of achieving positive outcomes regarding education and mental health. As soon as there are concerns about school avoidance, we recommend that schools use a graduated approach to intervene. Nova can assist in providing support to schools using a graduated approach.

**GOOD PRACTICE TIP:** When working with parents and guardians, it is important to have the most up-to-date information on services in the area, as there may be outdated preconceptions about engaging with services. We also recommend having a list of supports for parents to avail of through this process, as school avoidance affects more than just the child or young person. More information on services in the area is available by scanning here.



### 1. ASSESS:

- Appoint a key person
- Gather information
  - » Monitor/track attendance
  - » Review existing support plans/documentation
  - » Examine patterns of educational attainment, assessments and previous reports
  - » Be aware of relationships and social/emotional wellbeing
  - » Capture the voice of the child or young person.

### 2. PLAN:

- Devise and outline intervention
- Consider referral to Nova programme for help in planning intervention
- Decide if assistance or expertise may be needed from external agencies.

### 3. DO:

- Engage parents/guardians and the child or young person in the planning process
- Set achievable and graduated goals based on the purpose that the school avoidance behaviour serves as well as the severity of school avoidance behaviour on the spectrum outlined on page 4
- Ensure clear timelines are in place
- Ensure all parties are on the same page and that the message is communicated to relevant staff in the school
- Consider using interventions which target some of the areas outlined in page 10.

### 4. REVIEW:

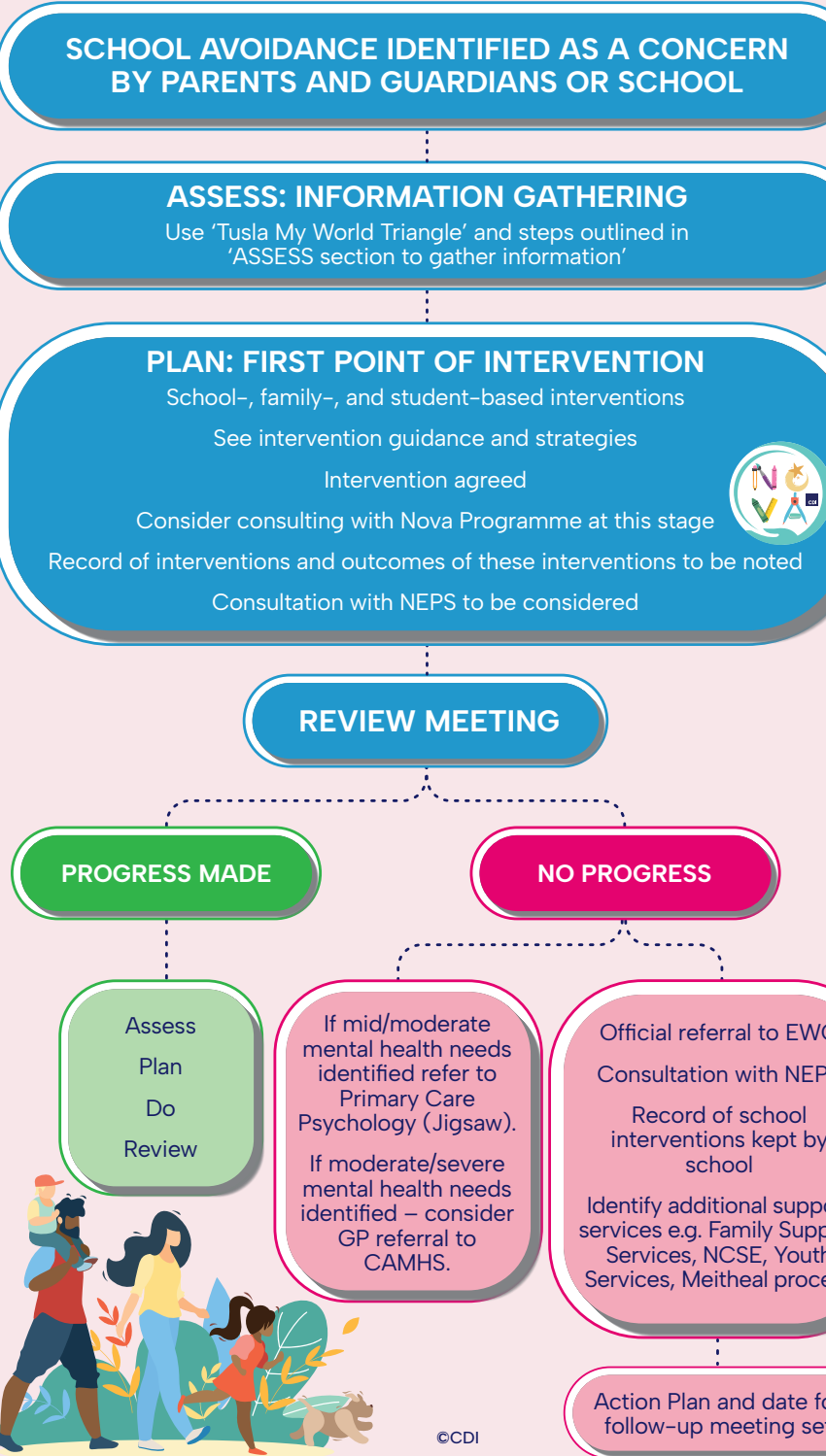
- Identify the areas of the plan that have worked and analyse why these supports have proved helpful
- Brainstorm other supports that may help
- Discuss barriers that have impeded progress and explore possible solutions
- Plan for regular and ongoing review meetings with parents/guardians to discuss progress
- If no progress has been made, consider linking with statutory supports.



## INTERVENTION GUIDANCE AREAS



## Roadmap for Addressing School Avoidance



**GOOD PRACTICE TIP:** Schools and families should strive to evidence progression between meetings. The time frame should be agreed upon with the child or young person and family. If there is a mental health concern, timelines for progression should be agreed upon according to the best mental health expertise (e.g. interagency group medical professionals).

**GOOD PRACTICE TIP:** Often when a child or young person is absent from school for a prolonged period of time, greetings or welcoming them back may draw further attention to their absence. This can be a significant cause of further embarrassment or anxiety. It is often best to allow the child or young person to reintegrate into the classroom without any specific attention being brought to their absence unless otherwise specified.

# Navigating School Avoidance in Dublin 24

Companion to the CDI Online School Avoidance Toolkit



# Introduction to using the Toolkit

Understanding and overcoming school avoidance is a collaborative effort that requires school, family, and community involvement. This Toolkit provides essential steps and resources to support children and young people experiencing school avoidance. For consistency, the term 'school avoidance' has been used in our toolkit.

The interventions in this document are part of a larger Toolkit developed by members of the Childhood Development Initiative's Nova Programme Working Group, including representatives from Home School Community Liaison in St Aidan's Community School, St Dominics/Old Bawn School Completion Programme (SCP), Children and Young People Services Committee (CYPSC), and Tusla Educational Support Services (TESS). The Toolkit has also received oversight from Connect Autism Services.

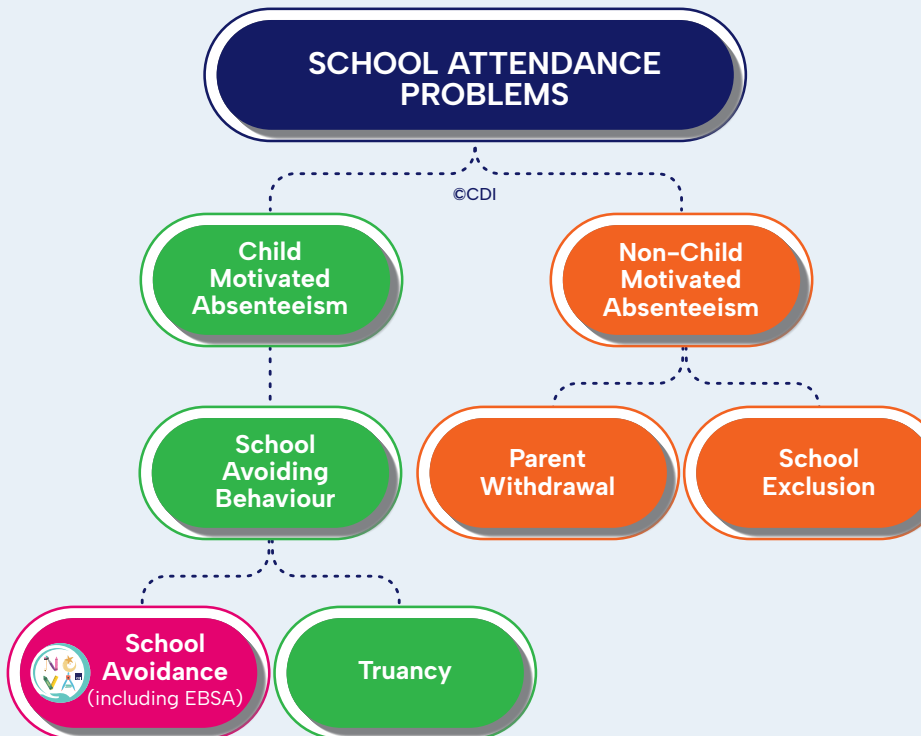
Our online Toolkit is updated regularly and hosted by the Childhood Development Initiative. It is accessed by scanning the QR code here on the right. QR codes are placed throughout this document to prompt readers to explore further information available on our online Toolkit.



## School Attendance Problems and Terminology

School avoidance is a term used when a child or young person struggles with attending school, often due to emotional, social, or academic pressures. School avoidance is often called EBSA, or emotionally based school avoidance. If left unchecked, school avoidance can lead to school refusal or early school leaving.

The terminology for school avoidance can be confusing. We have included an illustration of School Attendance Problems (SAPs) below. Parent withdrawal is where parents/guardians choose to withdraw a child or young person from school deliberately for various reasons. Truancy is where a child or young person is absent from school without the knowledge of their parents/guardians, having chosen not to go to school because they would prefer to be elsewhere.



**GOOD PRACTICE TIP:** Agree on the terminology the school will use in all interactions with the family and child or young person during the initial stages of addressing school avoidance.

It is important to recognise that although school avoidance falls under the category of school attendance problems, it is often more complex than just an attendance issue. School avoidance often only comes to light when it begins to affect attendance; however, school avoidance happens because of different factors related to the child, family, and school. You can find more information about these risk factors by scanning the code on the right.

As described above, certain risk factors can make a child more likely to experience school avoidance. The 4 Ps Biopsychosocial Model helps explain how these factors interact and **how** protective factors can reduce the risk. Scan the QR code for more details and a visual of the model.

Technology use and social media may contribute to school avoidance. To learn more about healthy technology use, scan the QR code here.

**GOOD PRACTICE TIP:** The 4 Ps Model can be used in many ways. It can be adapted as a narrative intervention to illustrate the story of how school avoidance may have become a problem for a child or young person.

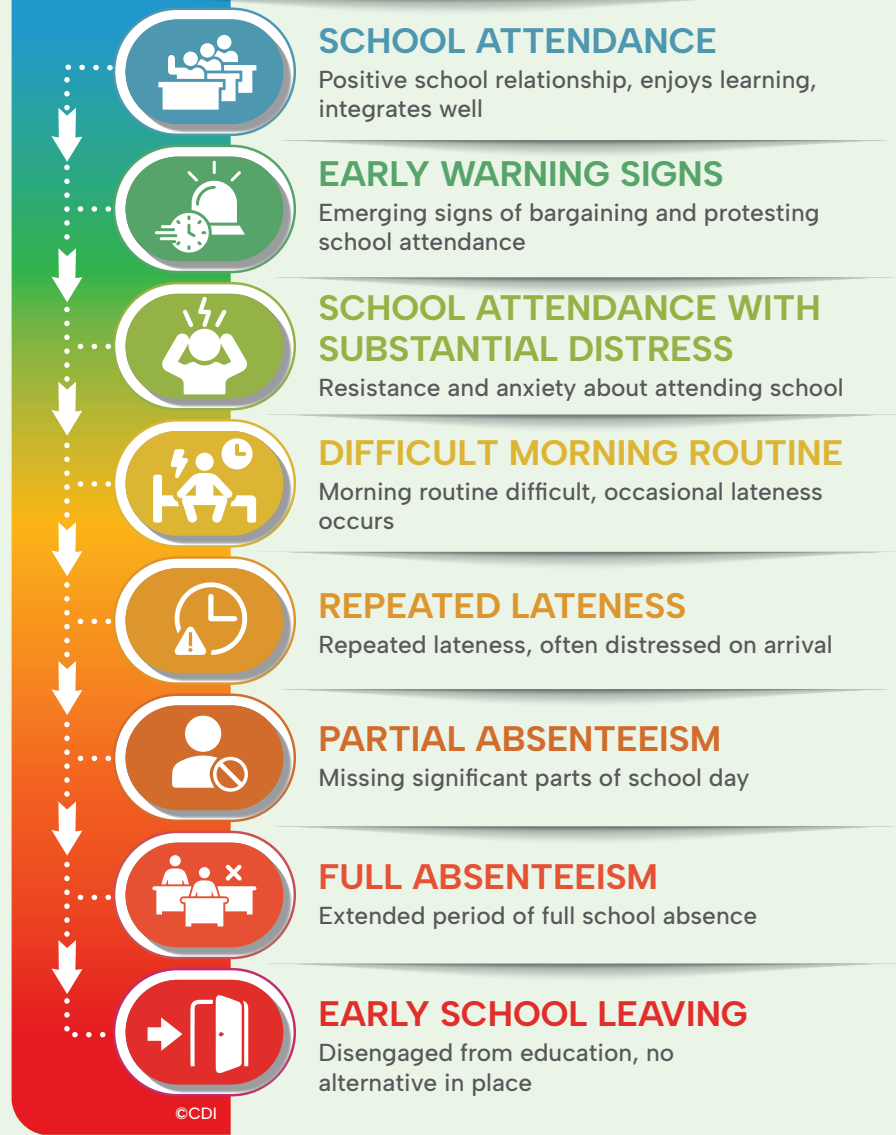


## Defining School Avoidance

School avoidance is a broad umbrella term that refers to situations in which the child or young person finds it difficult to attend or stay in school for a whole day. It also covers children and young people who may attend school late and leave early for reasons that pertain to difficulty in self-regulating or coping with anxieties. School avoidance often occurs along a spectrum and can range from mild, sporadic difficulties with school attendance to more severe, persistent difficulties requiring collaboration with the family/carers and multi-agency input.

**GOOD PRACTICE TIP:** Although school avoidance occurs on a spectrum, children and young people may not move neatly between these different degrees of severity. Recognising early indications of school avoidance is crucial in intervening early and preventing the behaviour from worsening.

### SPECTRUM OF SCHOOL AVOIDANCE BEHAVIOURS



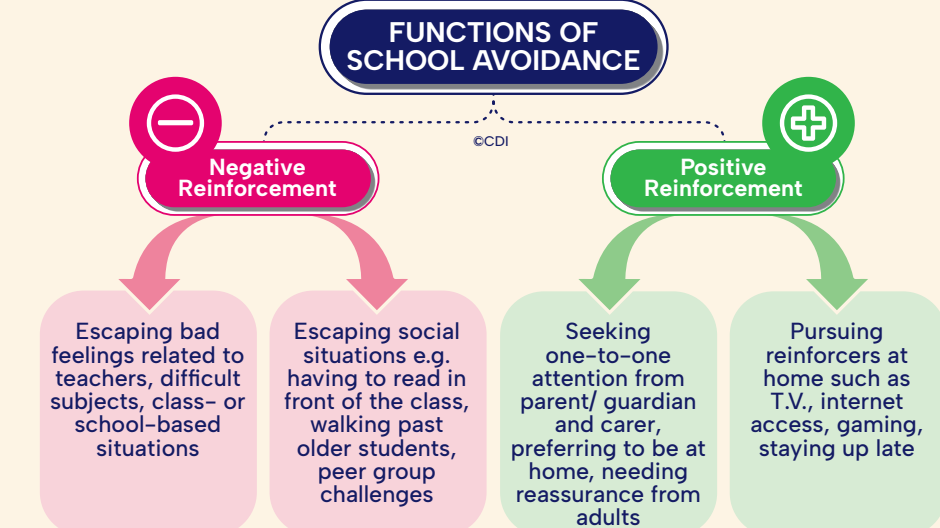
**GOOD PRACTICE TIP:** Creating a purpose (positive reinforcers) for being in school can be helpful. For younger children, staff may create a specific task or duty they need to be present for or a 'returnable object'.

**GOOD PRACTICE TIP:** Developing a school avoidance response plan should include a selection of suitable interventions at all points listed above.

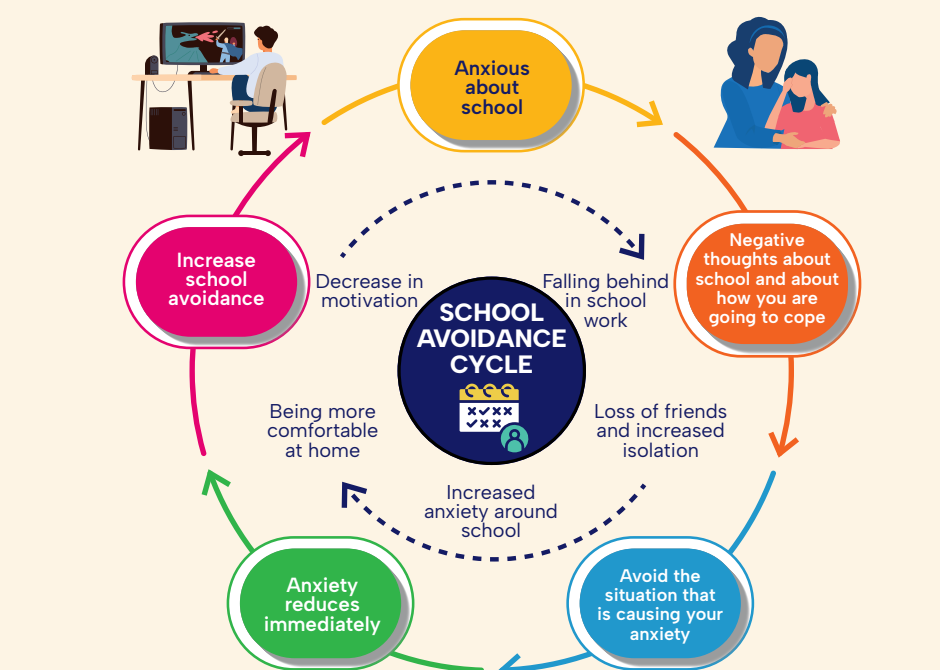
## Functions of School Avoidance

School avoidance, like any other behaviour, serves a purpose for the child or young person. Behaviour is a form of communication. A child or young person may choose to avoid school for some of the reasons listed in the diagram. School avoidance 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.

**GOOD PRACTICE TIP:** It can be helpful to devise interventions to address the specific reasons why the child or young person is avoiding school, i.e. focusing on the home environment if this is a positive reinforcer for school avoidance.



The following diagram illustrates the cycles of thoughts and feelings that can lead to a child or young person initially avoiding attending school and continuing to refuse to attend. This is commonly referred to as the Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) cycle, which links emotions, behaviours, and thoughts. We can use this model to understand school avoidance: the child or young person can often get stuck in a loop of feeling anxious about school, then moving on to having worried thoughts about missing school, both of which may result in school avoidance behaviours.



**GOOD PRACTICE TIP:** In the diagram of the school avoidance cycle, the anxiety around attending school has initially decreased due to school avoidance. Often, the anxiety will increase again when the child or young person has had time to think about reintegrating back into school. Keeping the child or young person tethered to school through online teamwork or schoolwork will help with this.

## Presentations of School Avoidance

### PRESENTATIONS OF SCHOOL AVOIDANCE

#### PHYSICAL

- Frequent complaints of illness before or during school, such as stomach aches, 'butterflies', headaches, dizziness, or fatigue. When followed up, it is often impossible to pinpoint causes of the illness from an external factor. These complaints may occur when a return to school is imminent (e.g., Sunday evenings, Monday mornings)
- Sleeping difficulties and fatigue.

#### SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

- Difficulty attending school after weekends or holidays, where there has been a period off from school. These transition points are vital.
- Clear evidence of underachieving.
- Long, unexplained absences from school.
- Periodic absences or missed classes for which no explanation is given.
- Frequent lateness to school and missing a lift/bus every day; these patterns might seem to be a series of coincidences at first, which may need further follow-up.
- Difficulty attending full days; they may often go home at lunch or have many appointments scheduled in the afternoons.
- Child or young person may have taken on a parental/caring role at home.

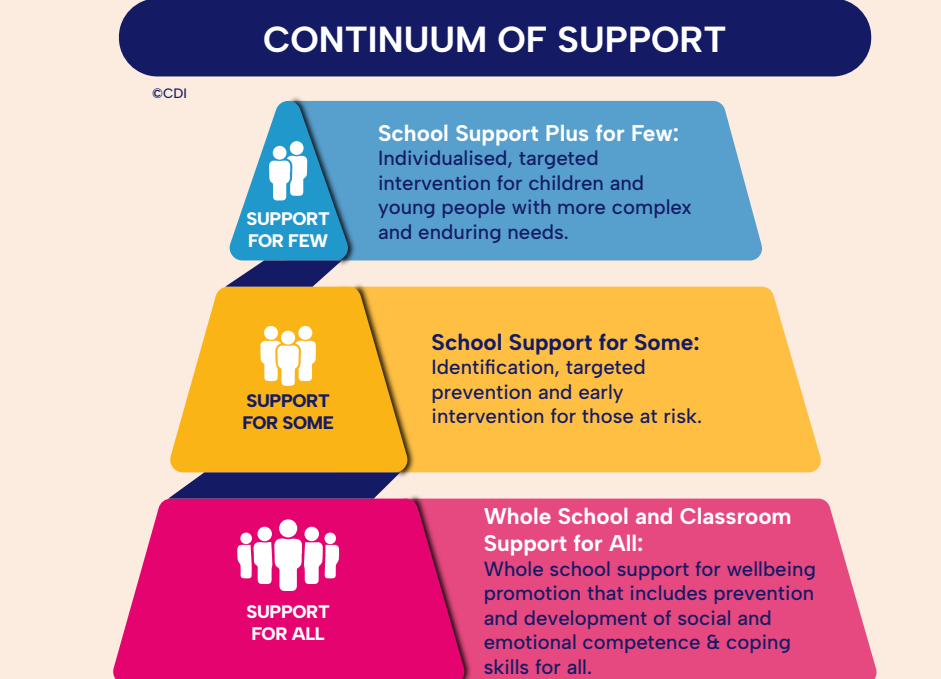
#### EMOTIONAL

- Anxiety around lunch times/break times as this is a change.
- Difficulty regulating oneself after break times or in the morning period.
- Separation anxiety from parents and guardians.
- Tearfulness when thinking or talking about school.

**GOOD PRACTICE TIP:** Consider adopting communication styles that don't involve direct eye contact with the child or young person, for example, going on a walk with them or involving them in a shared activity.

## A Whole School Approach to School Avoidance

The Continuum of Support is used by schools and services when developing their systems to support children, young people, and their families. The Continuum of Support model emphasises the importance of a tiered approach when solving complex issues. While the interventions outlined in this companion document focus primarily on 'support for few' (intervening directly with children, young people and families), schools may also consider adopting a whole-school approach to school avoidance.



**GOOD PRACTICE TIP:** Nova has developed a good practice section for schools in our online toolkit when considering whole-school approaches to school avoidance. You can find further guidance on each of the areas in the graphic below by scanning the QR code here.

### GOOD PRACTICE AREAS FOR SCHOOLS

