

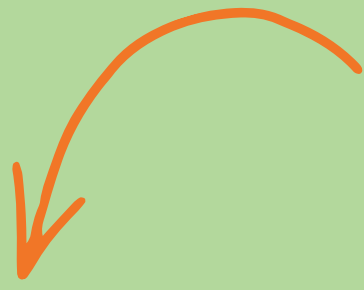
AN EDUCATIONAL TOOLKIT

SEEK AND HEARD



A creative toolkit designed in collaboration with young people for educational professionals to hold conversations with young people experiencing Emotional Based School Avoidance



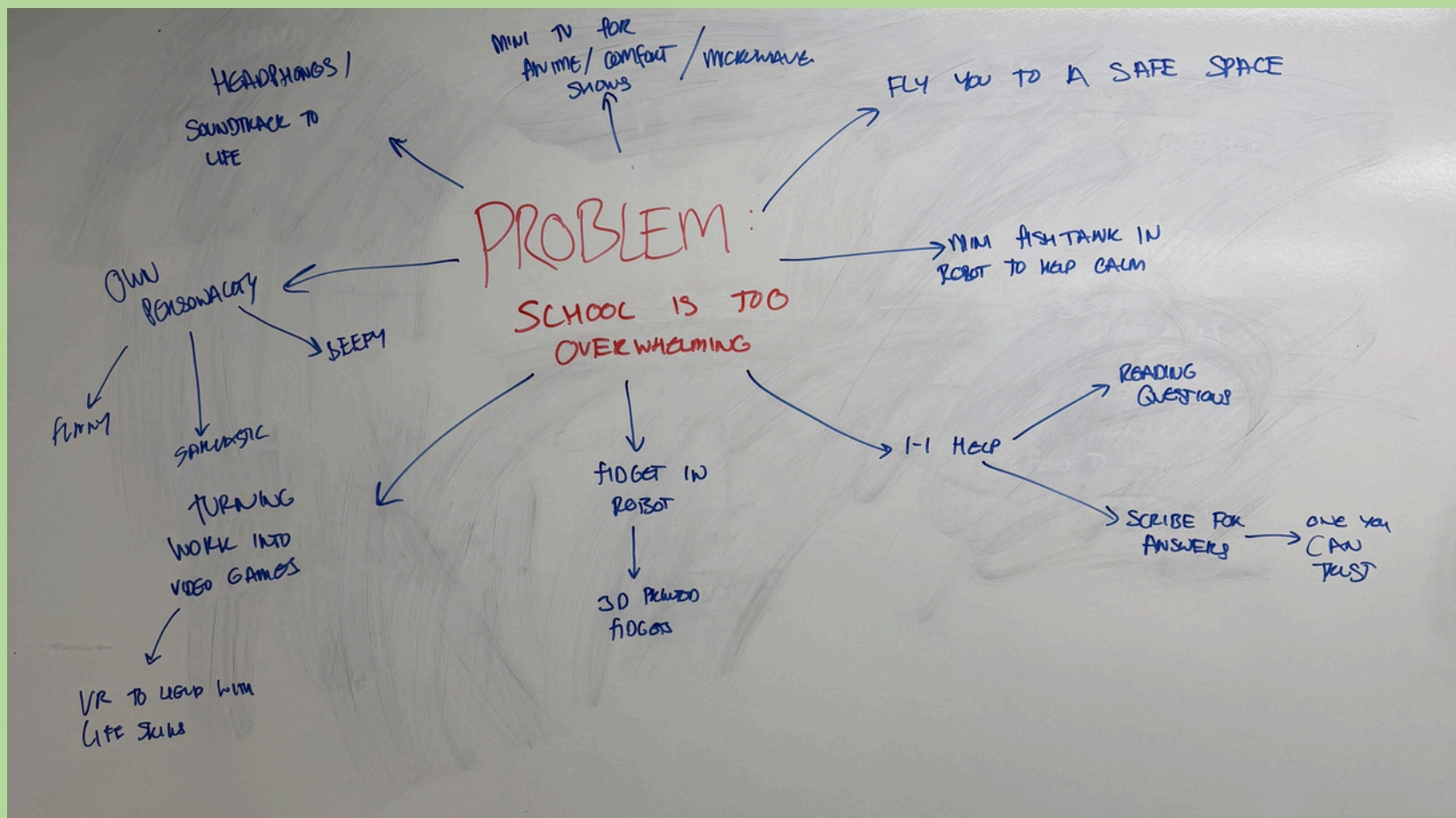


WHAT IS EBSA?

EBSA stands for **Emotionally Based School Avoidance**.

It is a term used in reference to a group of children and young people who have difficulty in attending school due to emotional factors, sometimes resulting in prolonged absences from school.

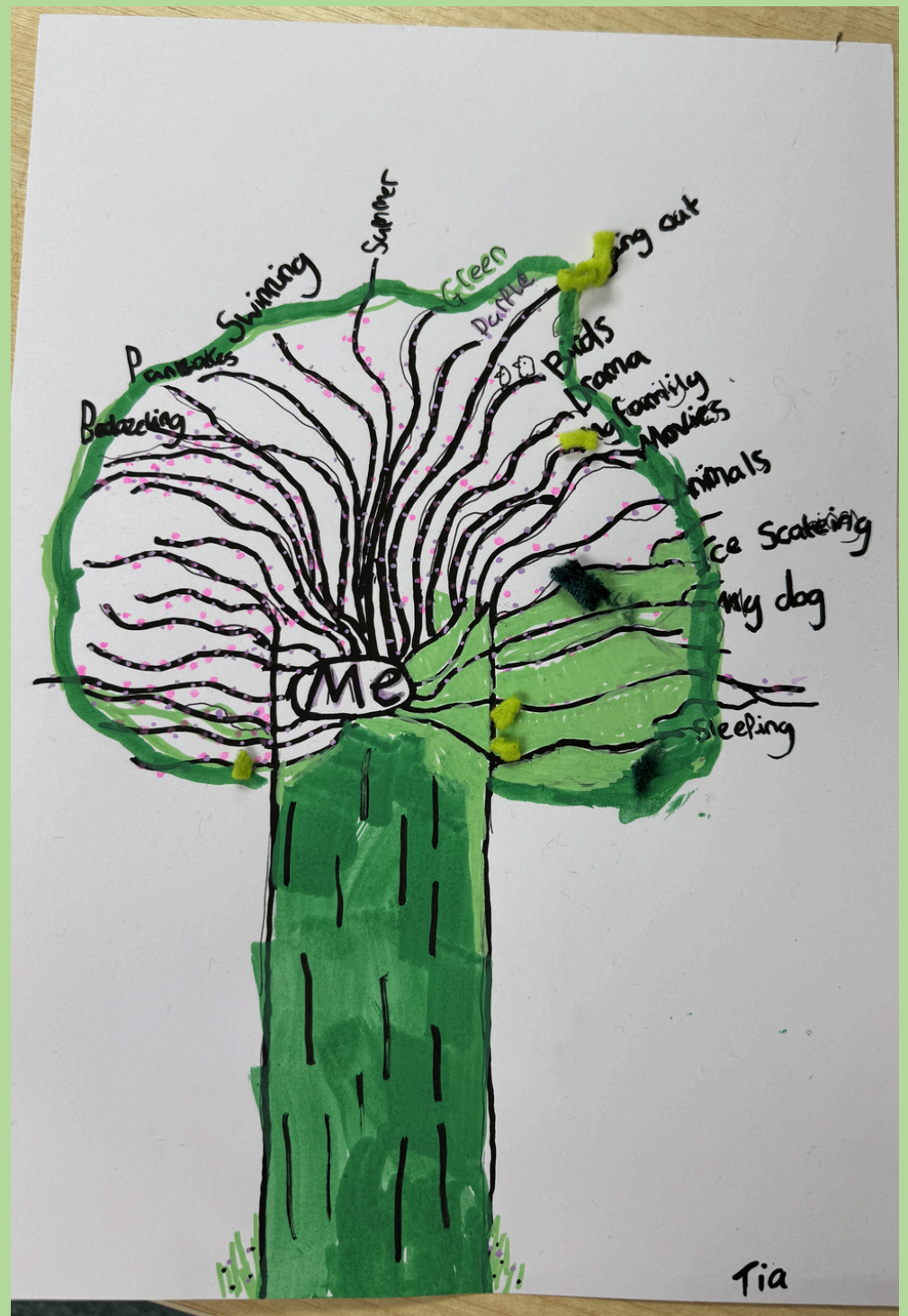
School avoidance can be seen as a form of coping strategy: a behaviour seen in pupils who, for whatever reason, are finding being in school difficult. The non-attendance may be conscious and planned, or it may be an instinctive response to a sense of threat (different presentations of EBSA could be viewed as either reflecting fight, flight or freeze patterns of behaviour). For some, an avoidant strategy might be used to miss particular lessons, whilst others might resist attending altogether. 'Attendance resistance' can arise suddenly in response to a significant event, or it can be more insipid, developing slowly over time. (Source: Suffolk County Council)



SIGNS OF EBSA

It is important to preface that every child will display EBSA in different ways. Some of the signs your child could present with are:

- Crying
- Pleading
- Fearfulness
- Anxiety
- Outbursts
- Expression of negative feelings
- Complaints of anxiety symptoms including, racing heart, shaking, sweating, difficulty breathing etc.
- Refusal to get ready for school or to leave the house
- Rumination and worry around school-related issues
- Sleep problems
- Psychosomatic illnesses (i.e. headache/tummy ache occurring when no underlying medical cause can be found).
- Defensive aggression (i.e. may display when feeling 'out-of-control') etc.



(List above sourced from: Brighter Futures for Children: EBSA Strategies and Tool Kit for Primary Schools)

INTRODUCTION TO THE ARTISTS AND TEAMS

ARTISTS

Ramona Bigwood is a p(r)op artist with a bright and vibrant style! She specialises in working with young people, both leading workshops and facilitating in the co-creation of youth-led projects.

Heather Gibson is a Bristol based, queer creative on a mission to create social change. Primarily working with embroidery and creatively produced video content, her work shines a light on the overlooked, misunderstood and misrepresented.

Mike Akers is a playwright, theatre practitioner and teacher. He has written many plays for young audiences, run Youth Theatre groups and facilitated numerous writing and storymaking workshops with young people.

AKA- THE AMAZING PEOPLE WE WORKED WITH!



ORGANISATIONS

Casey Lloyd is a Director, Producer and Arts Manager currently working with Super Culture. He cares deeply about co-creation, collaboration and amplifying voices from underrepresented backgrounds. Casey has been the lead producer on this project.

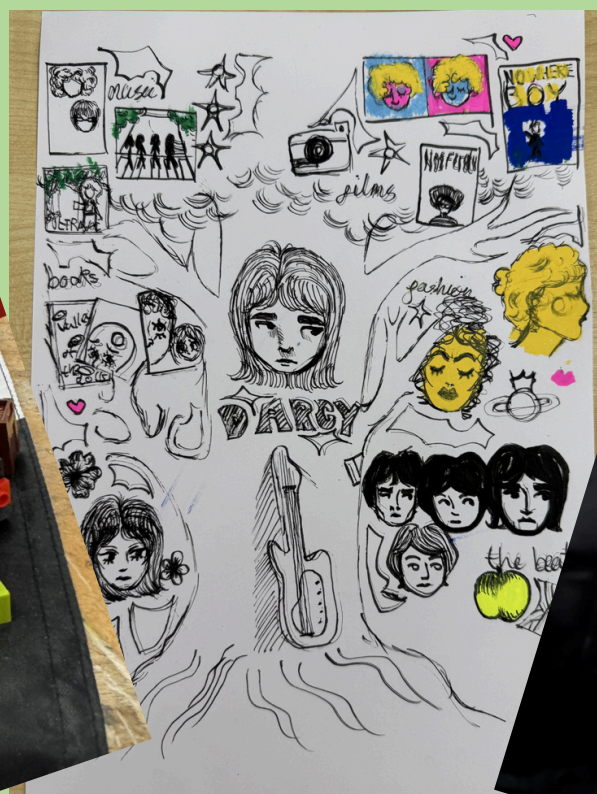
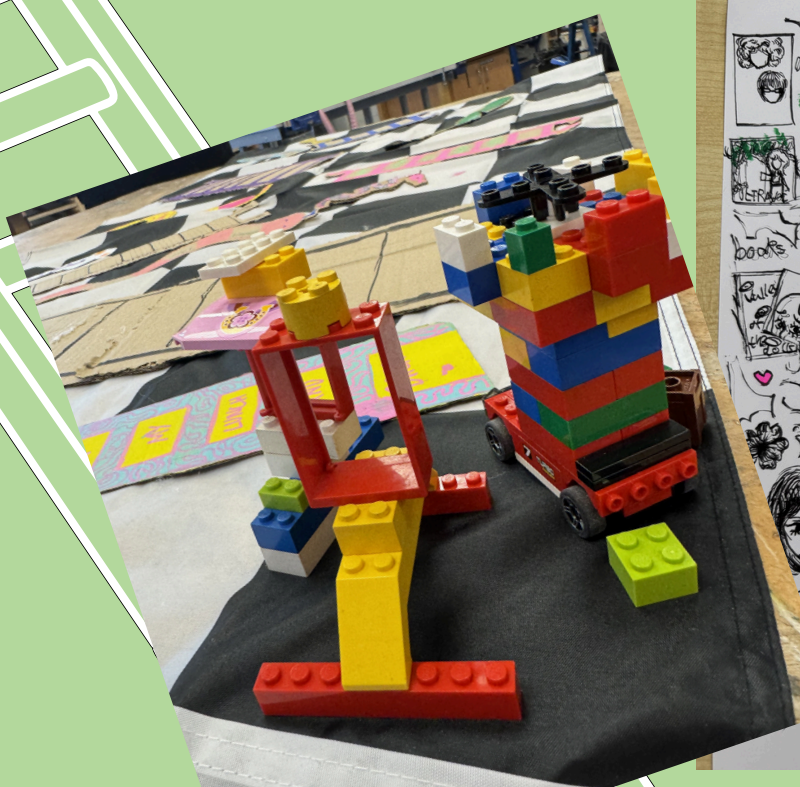
Jazz Thompson is an illustrator and designer, based in Bristol UK. Her work embodies murals, graphic arts, live illustration and design. Jazz has created the visuals for this toolkit.

THE PROJECT



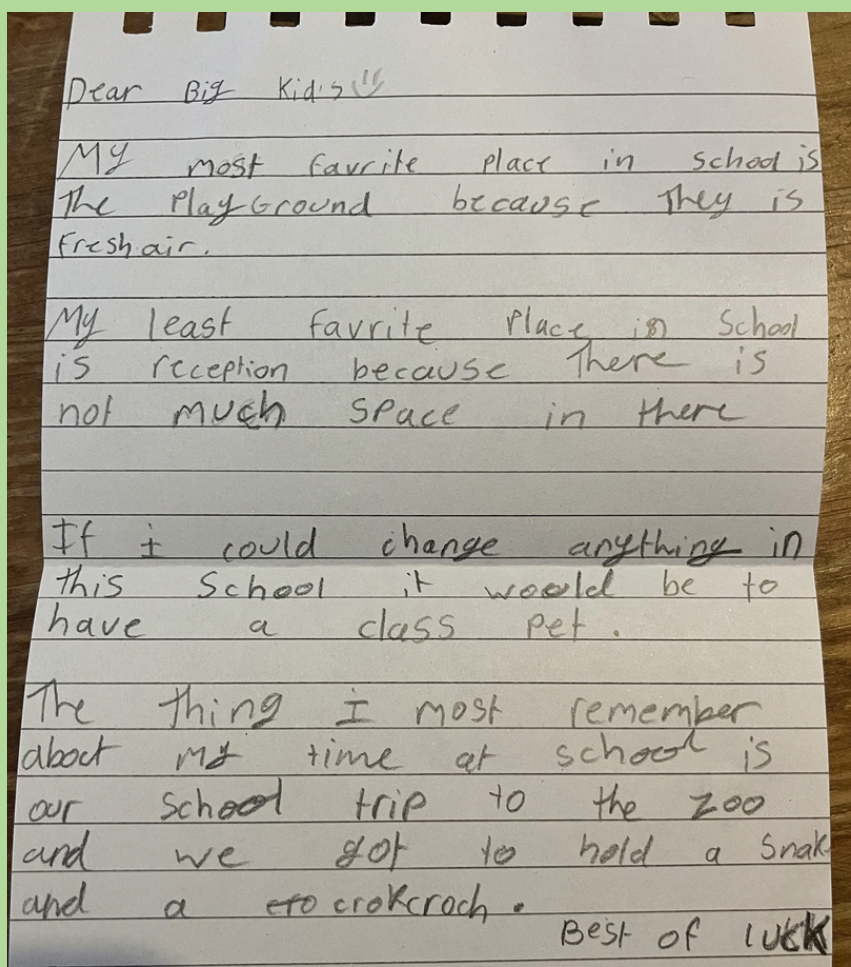
***Seen & Heard* was a 6-week creative project in a North Somerset Primary and Secondary School. The sessions aimed to develop youth-led creative approaches to opening conversation and developing understanding about Emotional Based School Avoidance (EBSA) from a young person's perspective.**

The project focused on developing safe, playful and creative spaces for young people to open up as part of early intervention with secondary-aged pupils experiencing dropping (but not yet critical) school attendance. The project centred young people as agents for change by empowering them to lead conversations and suggest ideas and strategies for educators that could support themselves, their peers and younger children. Through this, young people were able to suggest methods that could train adults to better understand and respond to their emotional and relational barriers to school engagement.



The project kicked off with a one-off creative writing session led by Mike Akers in a Primary school. The young people wrote letters of reflection addressed to the secondary school pupils, which acted as a stimulus for their sessions. The children were encouraged to offer honesty, transparency and given the opportunity to 'unmask', speaking freely about their experiences at school.

After this initial session with the Primary School pupils, two artists (Ramona and Heather) and a facilitator (Casey) delivered six creative sessions with secondary pupils, creating space for dialogue, co-creation, and problem-solving around EBSA - using the letters of reflection as a provocation. Throughout these sessions, young people took part in a variety of creative exercises whilst engaging in conversation around EBSA. Young people then led the design of engagement strategies and helped to build this creative toolkit for future conversations with young people facing barriers in school settings.



Dear Big Kids ☺

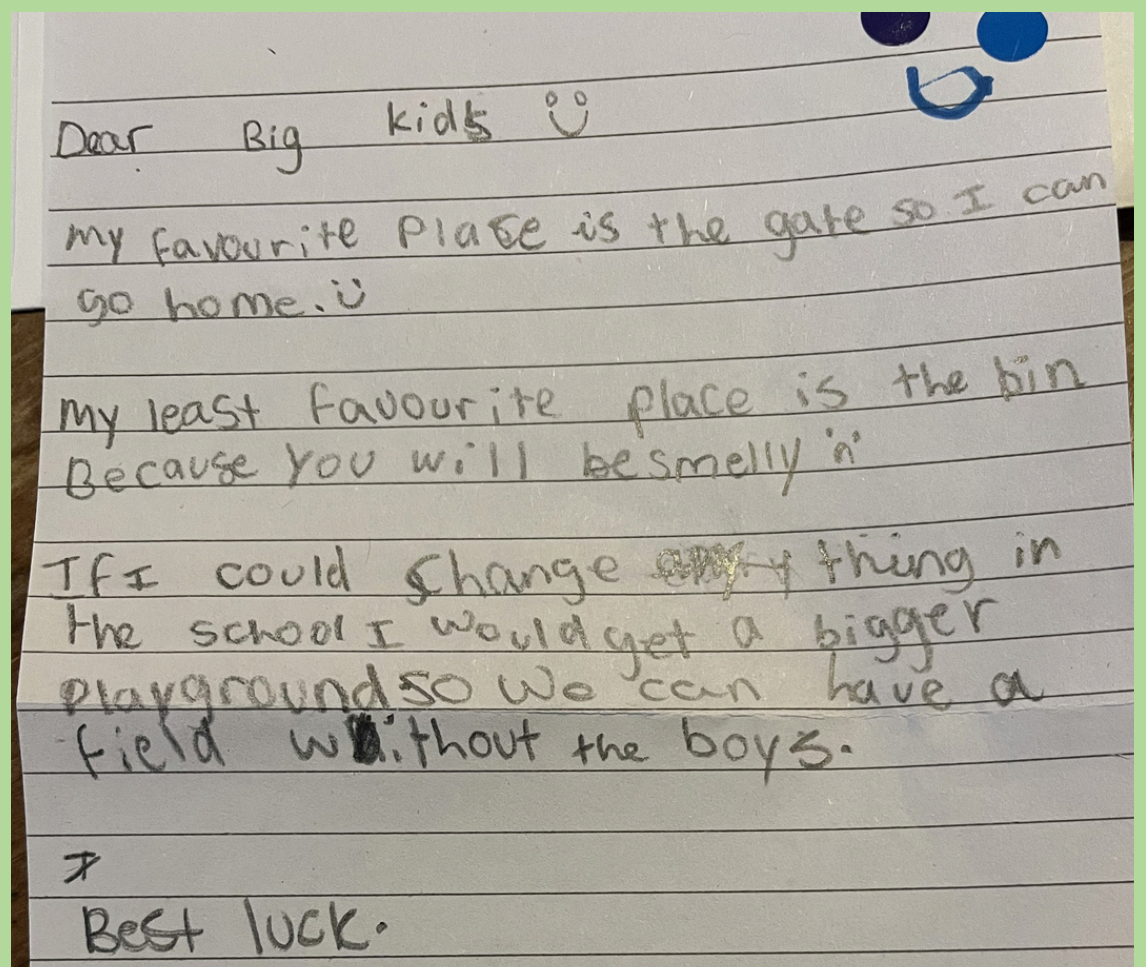
My most favrite place in school is the playground because they is fresh air.

My least favrite place in school is reception because there is not much space in there

If i could change anything in this school it would be to have a class pet.

The thing i most remember about my time at school is our school trip to the zoo and we got to hold a snake and a crockroach.

Best of luck



Dear Big kids ☺

my favourite place is the gate so I can go home. ☺

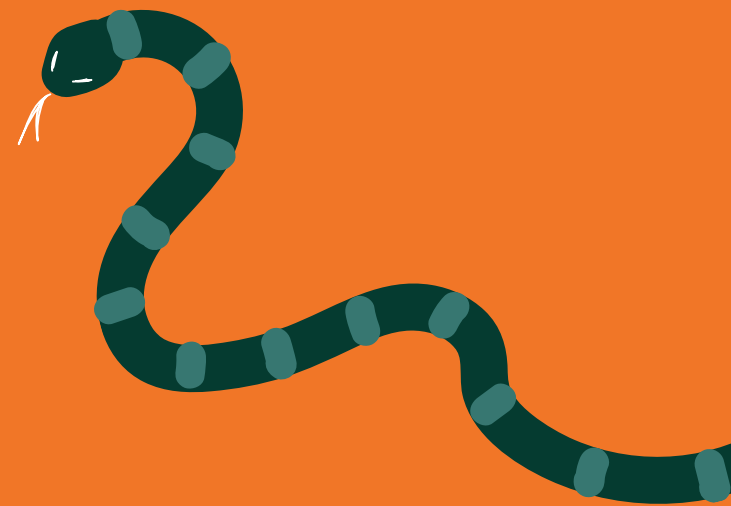
My least favourite place is the bin because you will be smelly in

If I could change ~~any~~ thing in the school I would get a bigger playground so we can have a field without the boys.

Best luck.

SOME OF THE LETTERS!

HOW THIS TOOLKIT CAN BE USED



The exercises listed in this toolkit can be used in a wide variety of ways and settings, by educational professionals and even parents.

This toolkit could form the basis of a ‘practical lunchbox’ consisting of a range of activities/exercises to be used by form tutors, teaching staff and support staff. We know that time is limited in classroom/school settings, so these activities are adaptable and scalable to suit different time frames. For example, if you’re short on time, you may wish to just use the prompt cards included in the Snakes and Ladders exercise as a provocation, whilst if you had more time, you may wish to stretch one of the exercises across one whole PSHE lesson and engage in conversation with young people around the topic of EBSA.

This toolkit could also be used as a CPD resource, helping teaching staff reflect on early signs of EBSA, what they can do to help young people affected by EBSA and how they could use this toolkit within their practice.

It can also help young people who are facing change/transition at any point during their time in school. Most notably, this can be used to help young people who are to make the transition between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 (primary to secondary school). It is important to note that young people face many changes in their lives, and these activities can be used to help them process such changes. This could also be used as an introductory tool for SEND young people making the transition between Key Stage 2 and 3, educational staff & pupils identify their concerns around the change, and helping to bridge the gap, preventing the possibility of school avoidance/refusal.

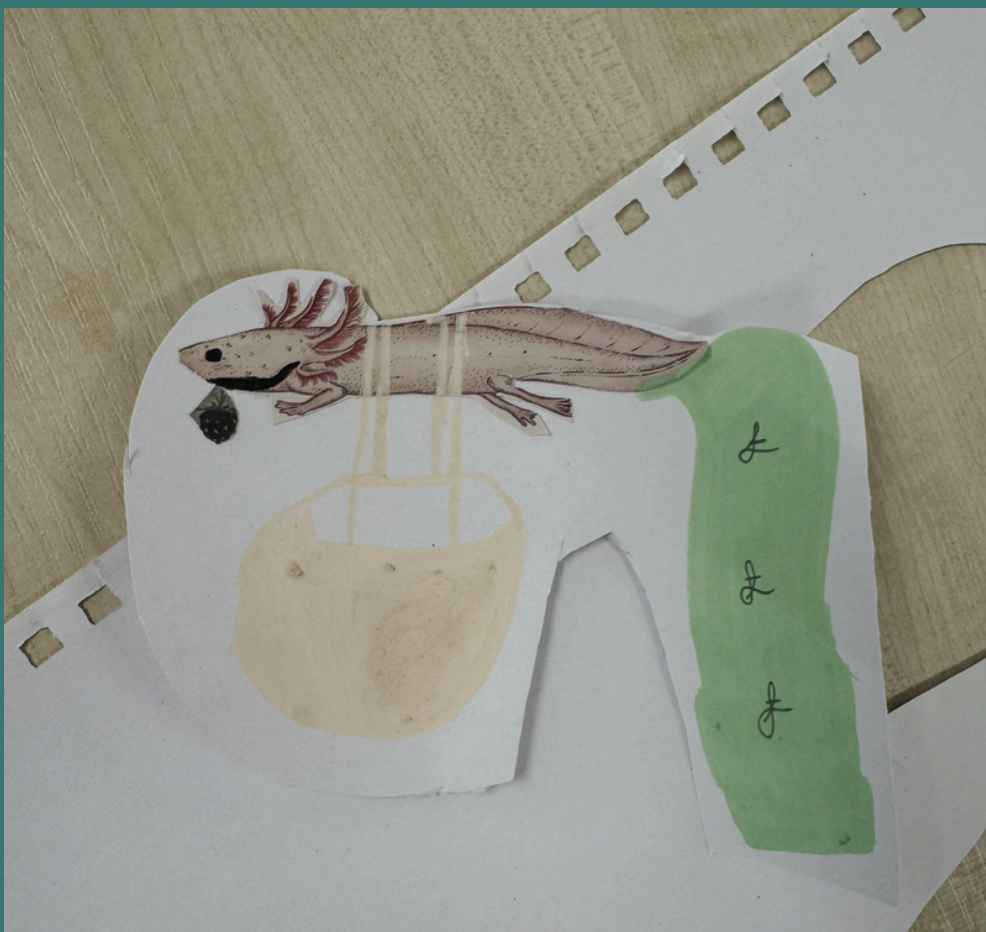
This could also form the basis of a parent toolkit, helping parents assist their young people in making transitions & in the long term acting as a preventative tool to school avoidance.



CREATIVE WAYS TO HOLD CONVERSATIONS

"Engaging with arts and culture – whether creating something alone, with friends, or in a group – can offer powerful ways to connect with young people on their own terms. These activities foster aspirations, teamwork, and self-expression by providing safe spaces for feelings that may be hard for young people to articulate."

- Dr Maliha Rahanaz
November 2025



Later in this toolkit, we'll share the Snakes and Ladders themed activity that was co-designed with our Secondary School cohort. This activity is designed to open up conversation around the topic of EBSA.

On the following pages you'll find a selection of the other creative activities we used throughout our sessions leading up to the final design, that helped us hold conversations around EBSA...

1 - LETTERS OF REFLECTION

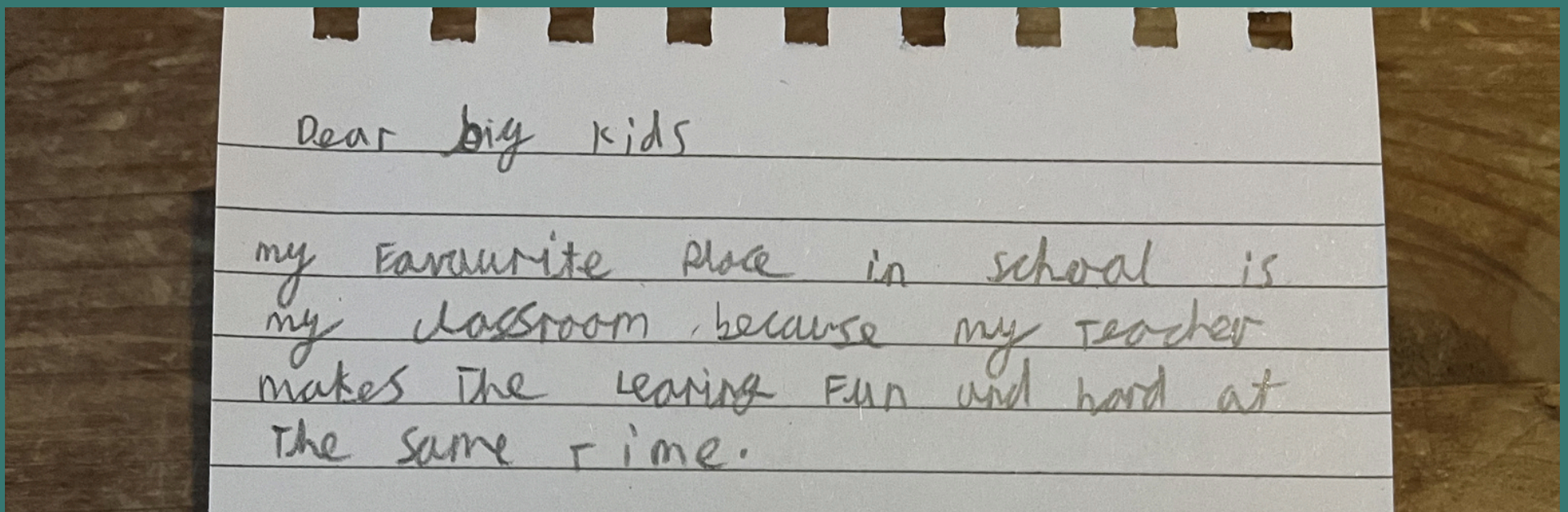
Ask the young people to write letters of reflections. Scaffold the writing of these letters with sentence starters that are EBSA - Themed, for example:

'My favourite/least favourite place in school is...'

'My favourite/least favourite memory of school is...'

'To make school a better place for me, i would...'

Once the young people have written the letter, ask them to sign it, date it, decorate it and 'post it' into a makeshift postbox.



2 - 'ME TREE'

Ask the young people to draw/paint a tree, making sure there are spaces for branches. Ask the young people to draw things that represent them/things that they like hanging off the branches e.g. hobbies, music, sports, family. Use these as a stimulus for conversation with the young people, finding out more about them as young people and what they enjoy.

3 - BANNER MAKING

As a group or individually, ask the young people to think of small, mantra-like phrases that they could come up with to help a friend who has been feeling bad about school (E.G. 'It Gets Better From Here'). From here, used scrap material to design banners with their messages on that could be displayed.

4 - EXQUISITE CORPSE

Fold a piece of A4 paper (portrait) into 3 equal sections. Tell the young people they are going to design a robot collectively. In the first section, they are going to have 5 minutes to draw a head. Once completed, ask them to fold it over so it cannot be seen and pass it on to another young person. In the second section of the paper they have received, they will draw a body in 5 minutes. Repeat swapping the paper with another young person. Finally, ask students to draw the legs/feet of the robot. Ask the young people to open up the paper and share it back with the rest of the group. TIP: You can add a prompt question to each body part E.G. 'For the head, could you draw something that would help you feel comfortable in school?' or 'For the feet, could you draw something that would help motivate you to get to school in the morning?'

5 - BUILDING ROBOTS WITH LEGO

Ask the young people to think of a problem they may be facing in school. Tell them that using the lego, they will design, build and name a robot out of lego that would help them overcome that problem. Share in groups or in 1:1 discussions.

YOUNG PEOPLES REFLECTIONS

WHAT DID THEY REALLY THINK?

Below you will find a selection of reflections from both the Primary School and Secondary School cohorts that were shared throughout the project. These are direct quotes and were all shared via conversations with the young people whilst they were engaging in the creative activity.

Primary cohort

'If i could change anything about school i would have more outside space - we don't have a field'

'My least favourite place in school is having to wait outside the lunch hall, it's cold and annoying and i don't like waiting 20 minutes for my lunch'

'If i could change anything about the school i would have Gordon Ramsay cook for us - the food is horrible'

'If i could change anything about the school i would get a class pet to make me feel calm'

'My favourite place is the headteachers office because there's a fish tank and it makes me feel chill'

'I Love Fridays, I hate Sundays'

Secondary cohort

'The toilets are disgusting... I find it hard being in school as i feel uncomfortable using the toilets'

'There's not enough space to be creative in school...'

'I was on a reduced timetable as I really struggled with the mornings and this helped me want to come to school.'

'The changing rooms are really overwhelming and PE made me miss school. Now I can sit in the library for PE, I don't miss Wednesdays.'

'I'd love to be able to do school online- or partly online. I just don't like crowded spaces'

'I'd probably like more help in being able to express myself more'

'I'D LIKE A ROBOT TO PICK ME UP AND TAKE ME TO A SAFE SPACE'

'I WANT TO SPEAK TO TEACHERS WHO CONSIDER AND EMPATHISE WITH MY EMOTIONS'

'IT'S SOMETIMES EASIER TO TALK TO NON-TEACHING STAFF'

'I FIND ATTENDANCE SUPERVISOR VISITS AT HOME REALLY UNSETTLING'

'I PREFER TEACHERS NOT ASKING ME WHY I'M LATE IN FRONT OF A CLASS - A SEPARATE CONVERSATION IN PRIVATE IS USUALLY EASIER'

Secondary cohort

'It's not what teachers ask - it's how teachers deal with it'

'A good teacher accommodates for what you need and I feel as though I can talk to them'

'I have issues with sound because I'm half deaf - I find lengthy verbal instructions difficult. I would prefer working in smaller rooms and have the option to do work at my own pace'

'NOT KNOWING WHERE TO GO IS DEFINITELY A SNAKE'

'I DON'T LIKE IT WHEN TEACHERS COULD CALL ON ME DURING LESSONS - ESPECIALLY WHEN THEY MISHEAR YOU AND UNDERMINE YOU'

'I WISH WE COULD LISTEN TO MUSIC IN CLASS - BUT MY OWN MUSIC, NOT LOW-FI THE TEACHERS PLAY'

'I THINK THIS HAS BEEN REALLY HELPFUL'

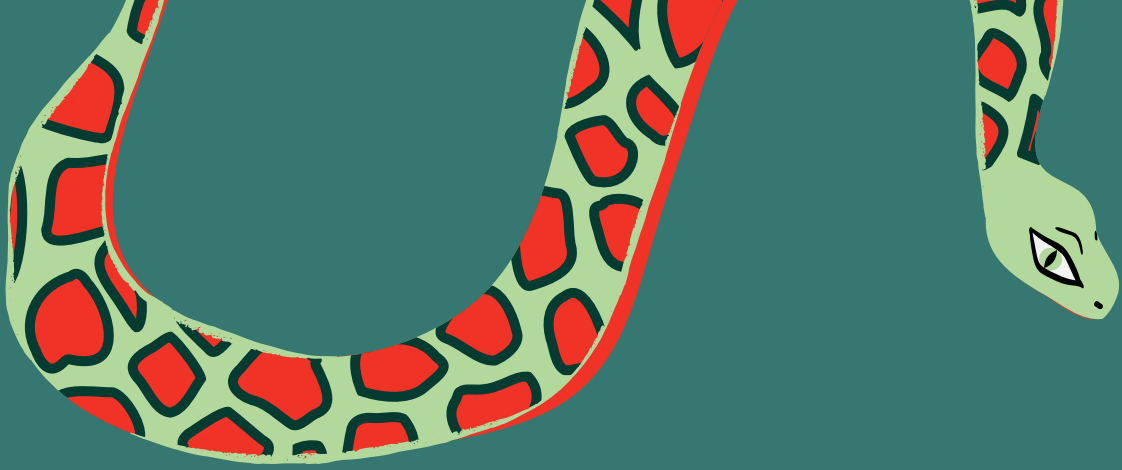
'I'VE ENJOYED BEING CREATIVE IN THE MORNINGS - IT'S MADE THE TRANSITION FROM HOME TO SCHOOL EASIER FOR ME'

SNAKES AND LADDERS

In the final 3 sessions with our Secondary School cohort, we started to develop our own co-created version of Snakes & Ladders, with the aim of helping young people engage in conversations around EBSA. This came from a conversation around the cohort's love of both video and board games. Research shows that gamification and game based learning can help children develop problem solving skills and improve attention. Through the young people's leadership, we created a version of Snakes and Ladders where the snakes represent barriers young people face when coming to school and the ladders represent solutions to those problems, helping the young people feel more comfortable in a school setting.



Over the next couple of pages, we will give you a step by step guide on how to generate your very own version of Snakes & Ladders, inspired by our own experiences throughout this young person-led process, with tips and tricks for engaging young people in conversations around EBSA.



STEP ONE

DESIGN YOUR PLAYER

HOW THIS WORKS

Ask the young people to design a robot/player.

During our sessions with the young people, we asked them to think about designing a companion/robot that could travel with them around school to help them feel more at ease. These robots could have a power and/or a skill that would help the young person stay in school. This part of the exercise helps the young person have a sense of autonomy and ownership in the game they are about to play, helping them feel more connected to the activity.

Here is an example from a young person who was a part of our project:

'The corridors in school make me anxious - so my robot would help me fly to my next class so I don't have to use the busy corridors'



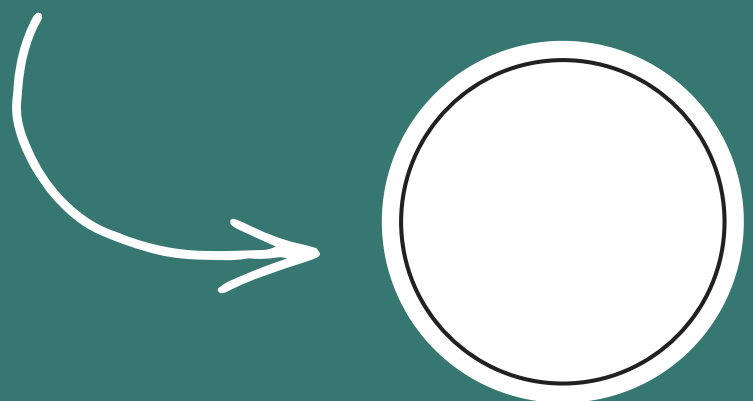
There are many ways you can ask your young people to design their player/robot, depending on the resources that are available to you.

These could include:

- **Designing your robot out of found objects in the room**
- **Designing your robot out of lego**
- **Designing your robot out of playdough/clay**
- **Designing your robot on paper/cardboard/felt/material**

BELOW, WE HAVE INCLUDED A CIRCLE TOKEN SCALED FOR THE BOARD INCLUDED IN THIS PACK AS A TEMPLATE TO USE.

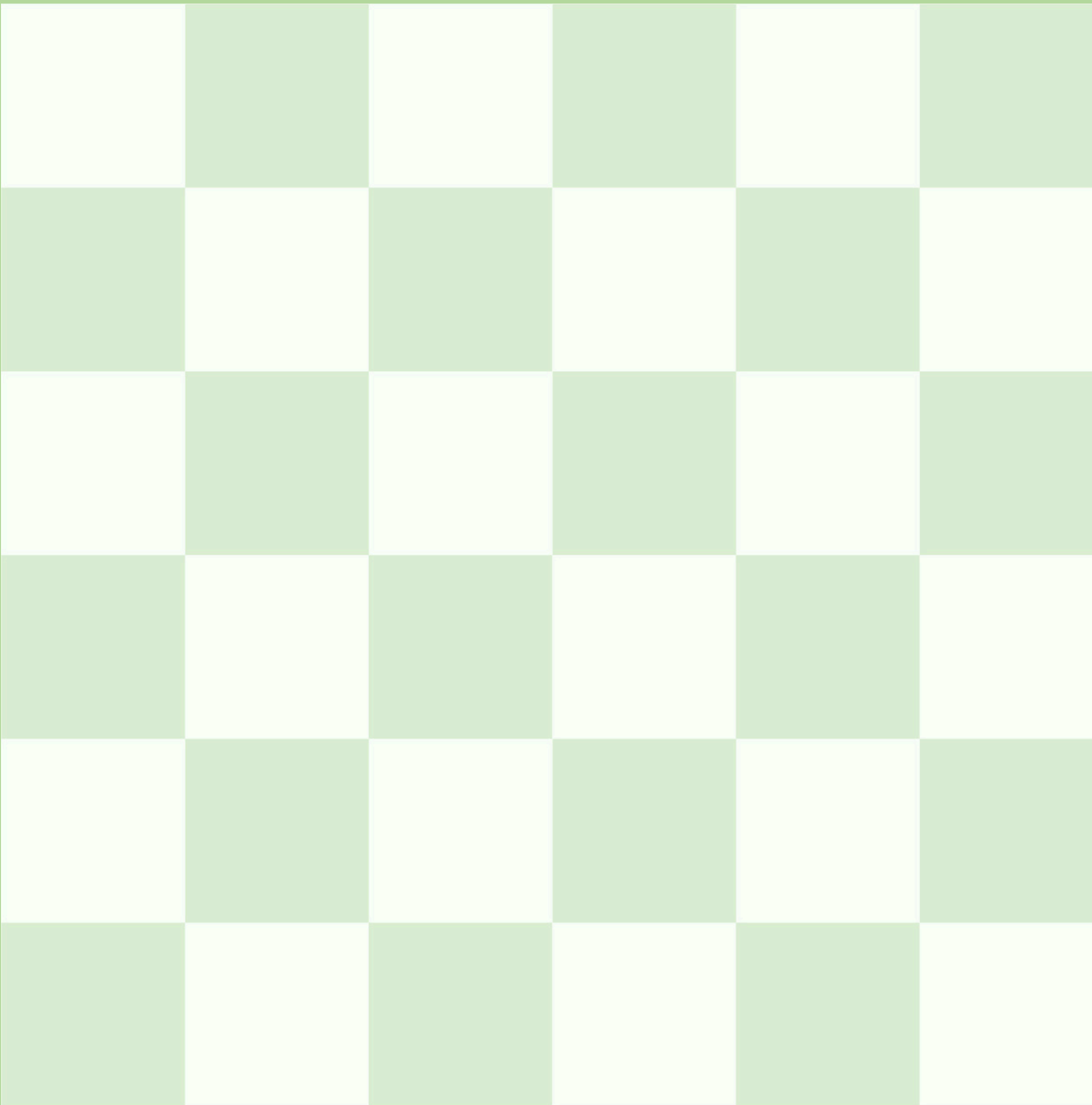
DON'T FORGET TO GIVE YOUR TOKEN/ROBOT/CHARACTER A NAME!



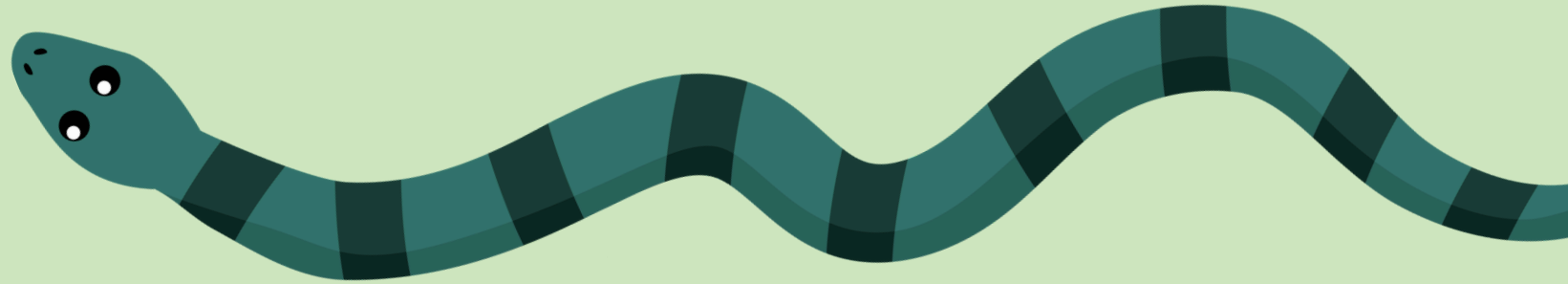
STEP TWO - CREATE THE BOARD

This can be scalable depending on what resources you can access. You may want to keep the scale small, in which case, feel free to cut out/use the board below as a template.

If you wish to do this activity on a larger scale, you could use a large chess board or even a large chequered flag as your board.



STEP THREE - CREATE THE SNAKES



The snakes represent barriers that young people face when attending school. First, help the young people discuss/recognise the barriers they face.

On the following page, we have listed some examples of snakes from our board. You can also use the 'prompt cards for conversation' on Page 22 to help your young people identify/vocalise the barriers they face.

Don't forget to ask the young person to write the barrier on their snake!

EXAMPLES OF SNAKES:

'Teachers who cold call'

'The toilets'

'Teachers asking personal questions'

'Saying things that make us cringe'

'Being late or being early'

NEXT, DESIGN YOUR SNAKES DEPENDING ON THE SCALE OF YOUR BOARD. WE HAVE INCLUDED SOME TEMPLATES THAT CAN BE USED FOR THE BOARD BELOW.



STEP FOUR - CREATE THE LADDERS

The ladders represent solutions to the barriers that the young people face when attending school.

First, help the young people discuss/recognise some of the solutions to the barriers they face. It is important that the young people are given time, space and the autonomy to try and find/voice the solutions themselves, so they feel motivated by the sense of ownership given to them throughout this process.

We have listed some examples of ladders from our board. Feel free to also use the 'prompt cards for conversation' on Page 22 to help your young people identify/vocalise the solutions.

EXAMPLES OF LADDERS

'Teachers having more empathy'

'Teachers giving space'

'Access to better facilities'

'More creative lessons'

'Reduced timetables'

'Doing art in lunch & break'



NEXT, DESIGN YOUR LADDER DEPENDING ON THE SCALE OF YOUR BOARD. BELOW, WE HAVE INCLUDED SOME TEMPLATES TO SCALE THAT CAN BE USED FOR THE BOARD INCLUDED IN THIS TOOLKIT. DON'T FORGET TO ASK THE YOUNG PERSON TO WRITE THE SOLUTION ON THEIR LADDER!



PROMPT CARDS FOR CONVERSATION



On the following page, you will find some prompt cards with questions that you can ask the young people to help them discover/find barriers. There are also two blank cards, with the option of filling in your own question.

Feel free to cut these cards out and ask the young people to choose one of them.



What would you need from an adult to help you talk openly about your feelings about school?

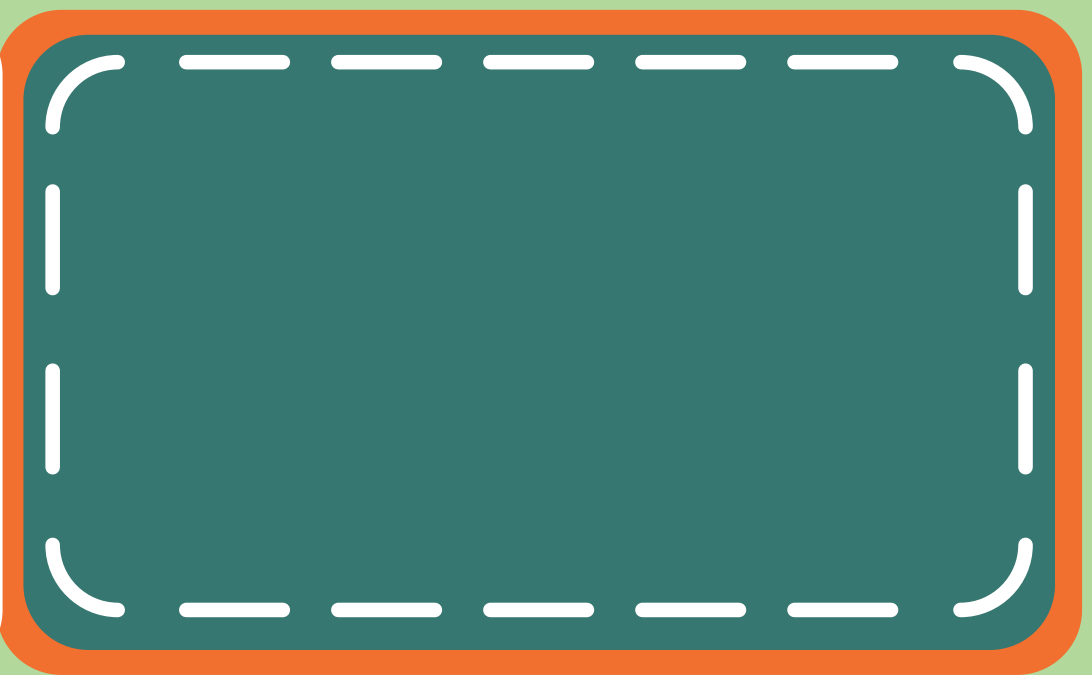
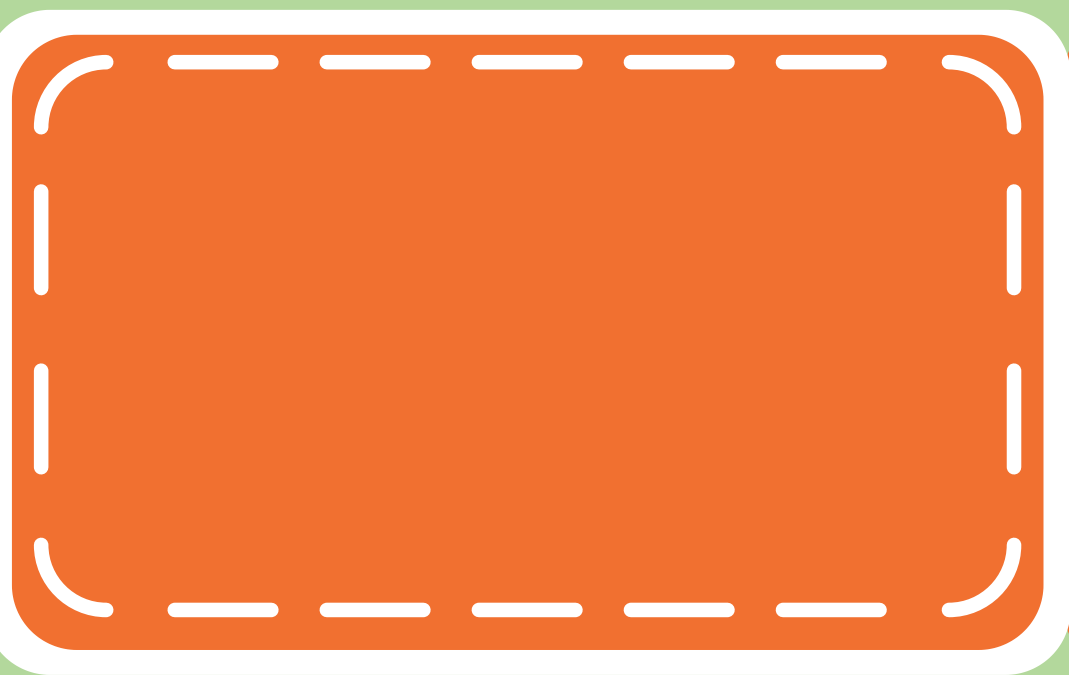
On a scale of 1-10, how comfortable do you feel in school at the moment? What made you choose that number?

If you could design the perfect place/room to learn, what would it look/sound/feel like?

Tell me about one thing that you like/dislike about school that you're comfortable chatting about...

If someone new was to join the school tomorrow, what would you tell them is the best/worst thing about our school?

What would you say to a friend who was finding it difficult to come to school?



PLAYING THE GAME & WHAT NEXT?

Once you have designed all your snakes/ladders, ask the young people to place their designs on the board. Remember to spread the snakes/ladders out on the board in order to give yourselves a fair chance of someone completing the game.

Once you have placed all your snakes/ladders on the board, find yourselves a dice, put all the tokens at the starting square on the board and **play the game!**



WHAT NEXT?



This game is designed as a creative starting point to hold conversations around EBSA.

As you play the game, either within a small group or on a 1:1 basis, you may find opportunities to hold further conversations around supporting young people. Once you have finished the game, consider asking the young people one of the following follow up questions:

- How would it feel if the board was full of snakes?
- How would it feel if the board was full of ladders?
- Could we think of some ladders that would cancel out some of the snakes on our board?





THANK



YOU!

GEORGE TIVENAN-DENSLEY,
MEGAN CLARKE, SUPER CULTURE,
WEST OF ENGLAND MUSIC AND ARTS,
RACHEL JONES AND THE YOUNG
PEOPLE OF WORLE VILLAGE PRIMARY
SCHOOL, SERENA ROBERTSON,
TINA DELANEY, AND THE YOUNG
PEOPLE OF PRIORY COMMUNITY
SECONDARY SCHOOL