

# How can we help children thrive, rather than just survive?

*An Emotion Based School Avoidance (EBSA) case study.*

---

Leslie Palanker (Learning Coordinator, South Shields Museum and Art Gallery).

In collaboration with the South Tyneside Educational Psychologist Lauren Bowen.



# Emotional Based School Avoidance ( EBSA)

---

## What it is

- a child or young person who has severe difficulty in attending school due to emotional factors.
- prolonged absences from school.

## What it is not

- parentally condoned absence.
- registered home schooling.

# EBSA in context

---

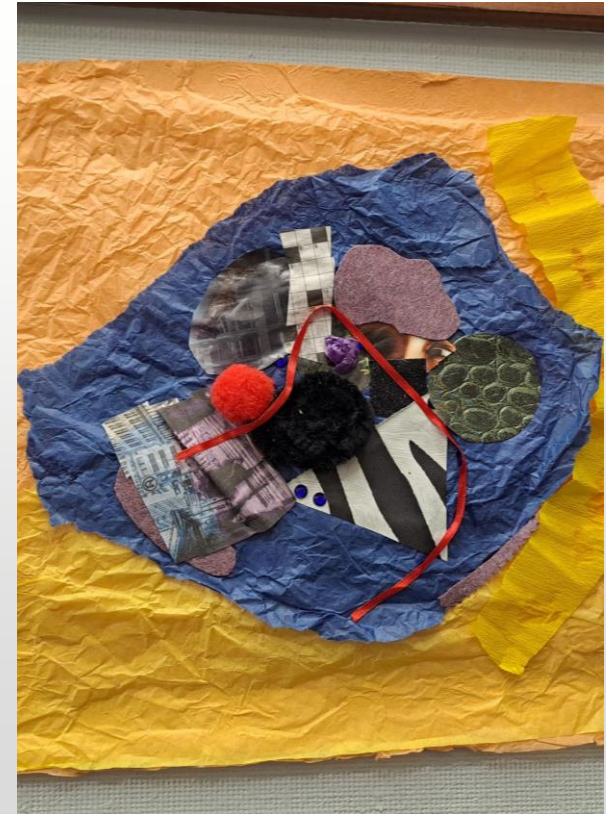
- The UK context is striking regarding EBSA cases, every Local Authority across the country is struggling to understand how to best respond.
- Ed Psych practice – feeling stuck, nothing seems to work, am I getting it right?
- Policies / guidance appears to offer tools .... But tools seem to promote 'getting back into school' rather than address problem.



# Lauren Bowen, Ed Psych: Understanding EBSA

---

- CYP who struggled to attend school but were **creative**
- What might this creativity tell us?
- What can we learn by harnessing this collective strength?
- Thinking about community spaces & other environments that support CYP outside of school.
- Local Museum rooted in the local community.





# The Project: collaboration between a health/education agency and the museum

---

- 1 Introductory session with museum trail
- 3 creative engagement sessions exploring art in the collections as a way to express self, feelings, identity, school experiences.
- 2 unstructured creative art sessions with freedom to explore the museum
- 1:1 interaction with Ed Psych, Lauren at each session
- Independent writing of a narrative to go along with the art work
- Exhibition
- Celebration and feedback session



# Activities

---

- Portraiture session
- Abstract Art session
- CYP led sessions around the museum
- Print making session
- Sensory and slow looking
- Access to wide range of materials for creative making
- Informal chatting between CYP & adults



# Astral

Astral, Age 15

My art shows my two sides – one is the dark, gloomy side. This shows how I hide myself and feel all eyes are on me when I am in school. The other side shows me when I am not in school. I am bright and can be more like myself. It almost feels like ‘sun’ and ‘moon’.





# Junior

---

Junior, Age 9

My art shows me hiding on a mountain. This is how I can feel at school, alone and isolated. The 'sun' is the building pressure I feel from everything about going to school and doing work. This can make me feel more alone.



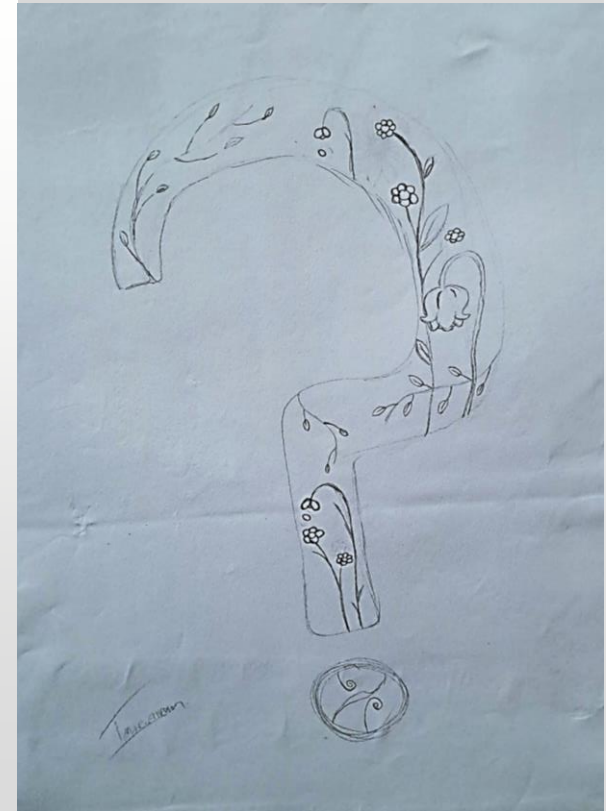


# Isla

Isla, Age 14

This art piece is a question mark because it can be hard to know how to feel or how to describe how I feel. But the flowers inside show a piece of me. Some of the flowers are wilting/dying because some days are hard. 'Bad' days are often linked to how I feel about myself and how I look. This can feel like I do not have any energy and I stay in bed. The alive flowers which are facing up represent my 'good' days where I might go out and do something. I can have a mix of 'good' and 'bad' days.

In this piece, not everything is perfect, and I believe it does not have to be perfect. No day will be perfect, but it can still be good. From an outsider perspective, my day not seem good but it can still be good to me.

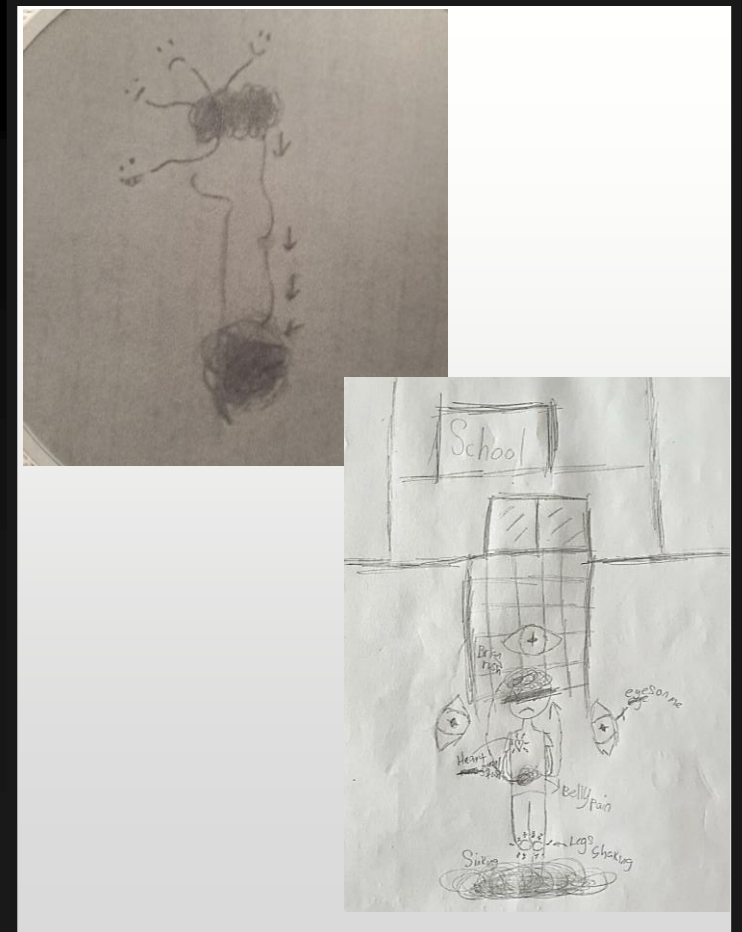


# Lily

Lily, Age 16

My art shows the pathway into school, the 'brain rush', 'heart rush', the 'rushing belly, pain in my legs and shaking I experience. I feel like all eyes are on me when I see the school doors. In my art, you see a person standing at the start of the walkway into school, standing there feeling like the ground is going to eat you.

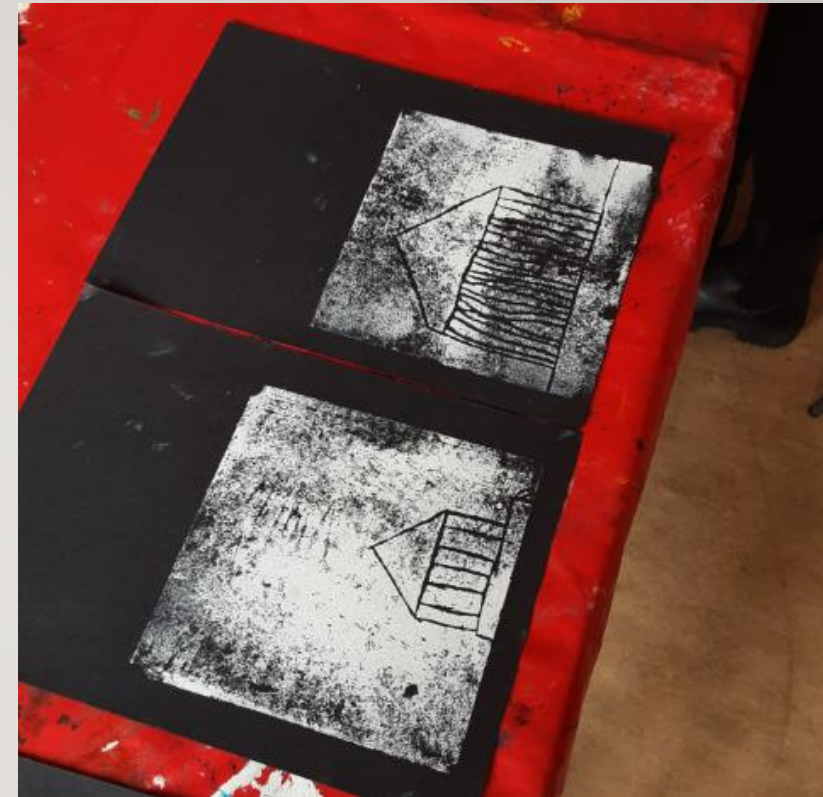
Art means the world to me. I enjoy making fun drawings and expressing my emotions on paper especially if I do not feel like using words. It helps me show other people how I feel to see if they relate or if it can help them in the future too, if they ever come across something similar. Sometimes I draw to take my mind off things as it clears my head. Drawing/painting is good for my mental health, anxiety and when I feel down.



# Collectively what did this art work tell us?

## Themes

- Watched – being ‘seen’ but not seen
- Isolation and something being ‘hidden’ – parts of themselves made smaller
- Judgment and pressure from outside influences

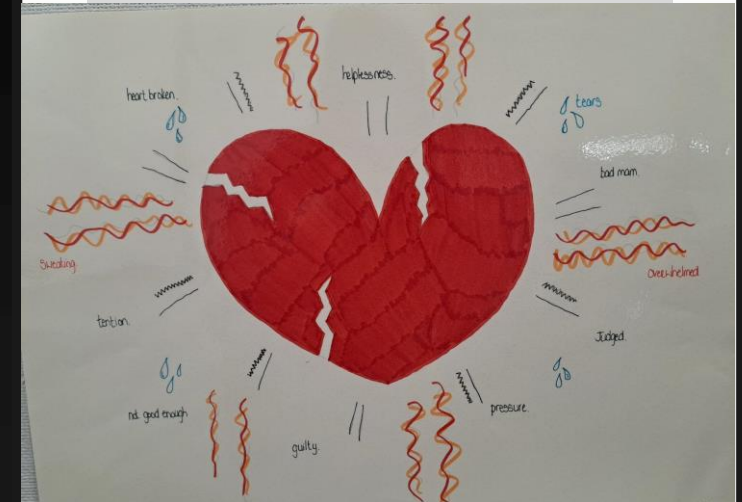




# Emma, Junior's Mom

## Junior's Mum

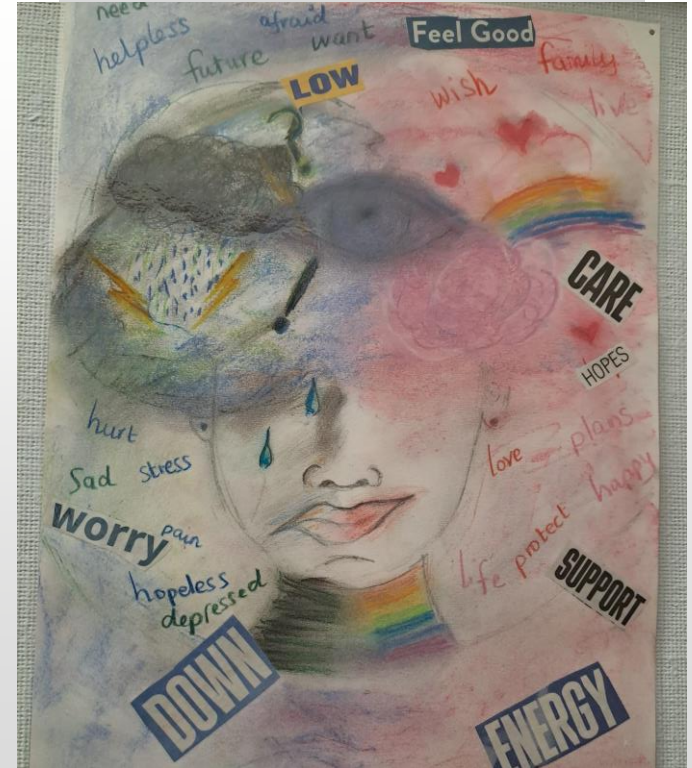
My piece shows my heart breaking when I was trying to get Junior into school. I hated to see him struggle so much and as you can see from my art, I started to think "I am a bad mam". It felt like a lot of pressure. It is important that those helping children with EBSA know that parents are often hurting just as much.



# Julie, Isla's Mom

Isla's Mum

My piece of art shows how 'messy' my mind can feel. There is one side where everything feels good and I am connected to love. On the other side, I can feel stressed and hopeless. When you have a child who struggles to attend school, it is hard to know what to do or what to say to make it feel better. It is a helpless feeling.

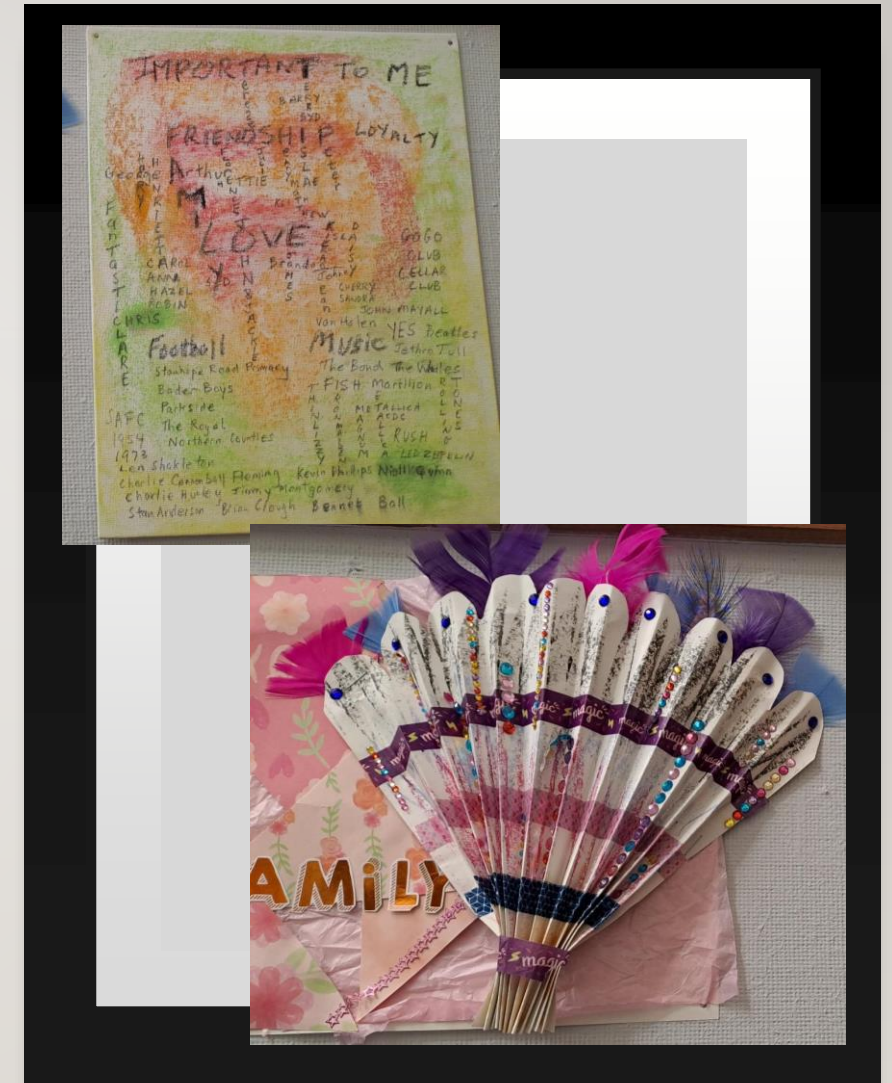




# Isla's Grandparents

## Isla's grandparents

We are Isla's grandparents – We created these pieces to reflect us and what is important to us. It reflects our identity. As you can see, family is extremely important to us. We have relatives who were artists and this creative streak runs through our family.





# Collectively, what might this illustrate about parental / carer experiences?

## Possible themes

- Energy and emotional impact
- How they are perceived as parents / judgments made and internalised
- Family structure as buffer / whole family – ripple effect of EBSA on whole family network
- Sense of trying to balance hope/struggles



# Exhibition

---





# Key reflections

---



- A museum setting can be a safe and valuable space for supporting young people.
- Building relationships, so children felt safe to explore their identities and feelings.
- Flexible activities and opportunities for independent exploration/creation helped develop confidence and reduce anxiety.
- Access to a community space and the historical experience of the museum meant children could connect with families about their shared experience of the town they lived in.
- Dialogue within the sessions allowed families to share memories – some of this provoked humour and joy and some memories shared prompted reflection on the impact of EBSA on family dynamics and how culture has changed over time.
- Entering the museum is a discrete achievement for many of these children. Owing to the nature of EBSA, attendance and engagement can often be challenging. However, accessing the museum space (a place where there is choice, freedom to move/explore and adults who are focused on helping them feel safe) meant children could **experience overcoming a barrier**.
- Opportunities to feel seen and heard without judgement was empowering and enabling.



# Participant Outcome

---

- Access to museum collections and spaces through play, sensory exploration, and guided visits.
- Memorable and positive experience.
- Reduced stress levels.
- Knowing that there are places of belonging without judgement.
- Safe space to create art and be themselves.
- Engage with a museum on a personal and professional level.
- Opportunity to exhibit work at South Shields Museum.
- Feelings of achievement and worthiness through having work seen by the public in a museum setting.
- Learned how an exhibition is created and how to write the narratives.
- Desire to return to museum and become volunteers.

# Museum Outcome

---

- To be part of young people and their families memorable and transformative experience.
- Opportunity to engage with local young people on a professional and personal level.
- Helping children and young local people achieve goals.
- Creating long lasting relationships with children and young people and their families.
- New audience members/volunteers.
- Relationship with South Tyneside Council Educational Psychologist and opportunity to continue to collaborate.
- Part of ongoing research and development of programmes that help schools, children, young people and their families.

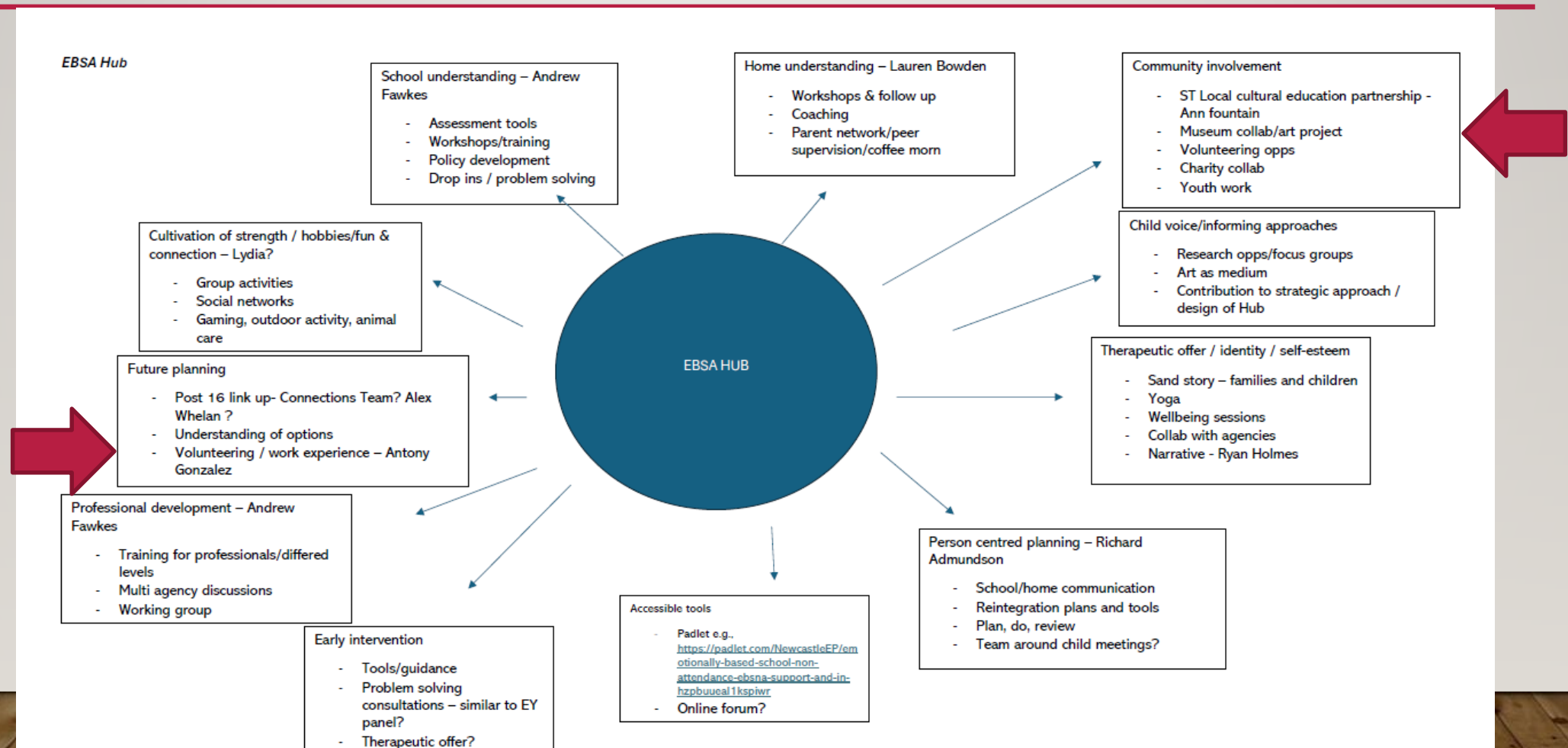


# Next steps

---

- How can schools and educational specialists utilize museum visits and engagement with collections and museum spaces for those with EBSA?
- How can museums support families with CYP with EBSA?
- What does trust, confidence and resilience in CYP through museum engagement look like?

# EBSA HUB



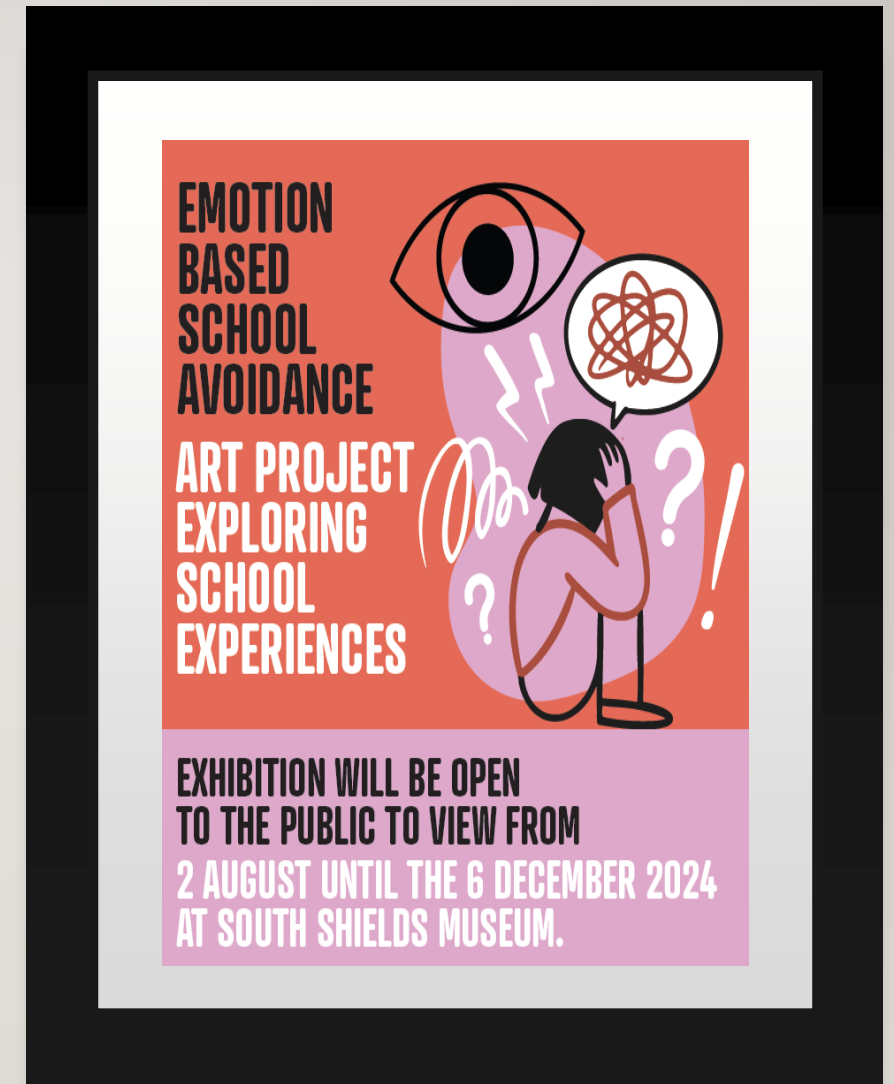


*“All human beings are of absolutely equal worth, simply by virtue of being human”*

Rustemier, 2002

---

The process of the project, the creation of the artwork and the exhibition aimed to refocus the ‘lens’ on celebrating diversity and create an outlet where children’s needs and rights are responded to. Instead of always being done to, they are done with.



# Slow-looking, creative response & feedback

---

South Shields Museum & Art Gallery has been selected as one of just four partners to host the [National Gallery](#) Masterpiece Tour, a three-year transformative opportunity to bring world-class art to the North East.

In early 2026, the museum will exhibit Monet's masterpiece, [\*The Petit Bras of the Seine at Argenteuil\*](#) (1872), which has only left the National Gallery once in the past 20 years.



