

Commentary

Building bridges around emotionally based primary school non-attendance: A practitioner reflection

Kate Howen^{}, Carla Solvason*^{}

Institute of Education, University of Worcester, UK

*Correspondence to: Carla Solvason, Email: c.solvason@worc.ac.uk

Abstract: Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA) is a practice term used in the United Kingdom for difficulties attending school in which emotional distress is prominent. It is not synonymous with persistent absence, truancy, or every instance of school refusal. This practitioner-focused commentary reflects on the development of *Reconnecting with School*, a booklet intended to support shared understanding between parents and practitioners working with primary-aged children in England. The focus upon developing positive relationships between practitioners and parents for children's wellbeing is central to this approach, and one that is too often overlooked in teaching policy and practice. Drawing on ecological, developmental, and relational perspectives, the discussion considers how adult threat responses, reciprocal anxiety, trust, and communication can shape support during school entry and the primary years. It then presents a six-step practice framework: notice, listen, understand, plan, implement, and review. The booklet presents an output of practice development, not an evaluated intervention. Its acceptability, feasibility, influence on relationships, and contribution to attendance outcomes remain to be established.

Keywords: Emotionally based school non-attendance, Primary education, School attendance, Parent-practitioner partnership, Relational practice, School transition

1. Introduction

School attendance difficulties are a pressing concern for children, families, schools, and public services. In England, parents have a legal responsibility to ensure that children of compulsory school age receive a suitable education, while schools and local authorities have statutory responsibilities for recording attendance, identifying barriers, offering support, and using legal intervention where support is unsuccessful, not engaged with, or inappropriate (Department for Education [DfE], 2026; Education Act, 1996). Current guidance is explicit that effective attendance work depends on relationships with pupils and families and on understanding barriers rather than treating absence only as a compliance problem

(DfE, 2026).

This commentary focuses on primary education in England, including the transition into compulsory schooling. Evidence from other phases and geographical locations is used selectively to illuminate relational or developmental questions, and does not suggest that systems are interchangeable. The discussion has three purposes: to clarify the practice problem that prompted the development of a parent-practitioner booklet; to explain, transparently, how the resource was developed; and to offer critically framed reflections that practitioners can adapt to their own settings.

The paper is written by two teacher educators who both have prior school experience as well as experience as parents. Whilst one author led the practice-development

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activity with a primary school; both authors contributed to the critical interpretation and writing. The paper does not report a case-study evaluation, or a tested model of effectiveness; instead, its contribution is a structured account of practice development. We share how published evidence, professional experience, and informal consultation were translated into an accessible resource, highlighting what practitioners might learn from that process, and what remains uncertain.

2. Scope and terminology

Terminology in the school-attendance field is contested. School attendance problems is often used as an umbrella term covering various patterns and causes, including school refusal, truancy, school withdrawal, and school exclusion (Heyne et al., 2019). Persistent absence is an administrative category based on the proportion of sessions missed, however it does not identify *why* a pupil is absent and cannot be used as a proxy measure for Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA). School refusal has a longer clinical and research history and is commonly associated with child-motivated difficulty attending school, alongside emotional distress, but definitions vary (Heyne et al., 2019). In UK practice, Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) and EBSNA are used to foreground distress and to reduce implications of willful refusal. Guidance regarding school refusal varies substantially in terminology, conceptualization, and recommended practice (Hammond-Price et al., 2025; Malley et al., 2026).

In this commentary, EBSNA refers to difficulty attending or remaining in school when emotional distress is a prominent part of the presentation. The term does not imply that the cause lies solely within the child. Distress may arise through interactions between a child's developmental needs and what is experienced in their environment: relationships, school experiences, family circumstances, health, neurodevelopment or material conditions. As such, it may be a response to the child's immediate environment or wider systems. This ecological definition avoids presenting EBSNA as a single diagnosis or a uniform pathway. Each child's pattern requires individual assessment and response.

The source selection was purposive and narrative rather than systematic. It was not designed to identify every publication, estimate effects, or establish a new evidence synthesis. Sources were selected for direct relevance to primary-school attendance difficulties, parent-practitioner relationships, developmental transition, emotional labour, and the English policy context. Recent peer-reviewed literature and current statutory guidance were prioritized, while older sources were retained where they provided a foundational concept, such as ecological development, attachment, emotional labour, relational trust, or functional assessment. Empirical studies and systematic reviews are used to describe reported experiences, and Government

guidance is used to establish current responsibilities in England. Local-authority guidance is used cautiously to demonstrate suggested approaches, and is recognized as showing substantial variation in language, scope, and implementation detail (Hammond-Price et al., 2025; Malley et al., 2026).

National persistent-absence figures provide important context for attendance work but cannot establish the prevalence of EBSNA. Persistent absence and EBSNA are not equivalent constructs, they involve different causes, populations, thresholds, and measurement periods. The practical case for attention to EBSNA rests instead on the documented complexity of attendance problems, the distress reported by families and staff, and the limited evidence available for school-partnered interventions (Alaimo & Kelly, 2025; McDonald & Pervez, 2025; Onslow & Cartmell, 2025).

3. Developmental and relational foundations for practice

3.1 School entry as an ecological transition

Entry to primary school is both an institutional transition and a developmental transition. Children encounter new adults, peer groups, routines, sensory environments, expectations, and periods of separation from familiar caregivers. An ecological perspective locates adjustment in the relationships found within and between these settings rather than in a child's characteristics alone (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The connection between home and school is part of the child's immediate developmental environment: when adults exchange information, understand one another's roles, and create continuity, the child experiences a more coherent transition. When messages, expectations, or emotional cues conflict, uncertainty can increase.

Attachment theory offers a complementary, though not exhaustive, lens. Younger children often use familiar caregivers as a secure base from which to explore unfamiliar environments (Bowlby, 1982). Separation distress at school entry should not, therefore, be perceived as a within child issue; practitioners need to consider the intensity of the change that the child is experiencing. Research on preschool-to-primary transitions emphasizes preparation across settings, continuity of information, relational safety, and meaningful participation by children and parents (Moir & Johnson, 2021). Predictable handovers, a trusted receiving adult, familiar routines, and gradual opportunities to experience safety can help children tolerate separation, although research suggests that families do not have equal access to such transition support (Ng et al., 2026). However, these seemingly basic approaches need to be individualized and reviewed; a routine that reassures one child may heighten another child's distress.

3.2 Psychological interaction mechanisms between parents and practitioners

When a child is distressed, parents may fear that their child is unsafe, disbelieved, or being pushed beyond what they can comfortably tolerate. Parent accounts of attendance difficulties describe experiences of judgment and guilt, uncertainty about appropriate support, and difficulty navigating professional systems (McDonald et al., 2023; Onslow & Cartmell, 2025; Sawyer & Collingwood, 2024). Meanwhile, practitioners may fear the consequences of prolonged absence, feel accountable for attendance, or experience their competence and professional judgment as being questioned (Alaimo & Kelly, 2025; Cunningham et al., 2022). These understandable pressures can contribute to relationship breakdown between staff and parents: urgent or compliance-focused messages may be experienced as blame and parental hesitation may be interpreted as resistance. As a result trust may deteriorate. The child's experience is shaped partly by these adult interactions. Contradictory explanations, visibly tense handovers, or rapidly changing plans can amplify the child's uncertainty and discomfort, conversely, coordinated adult responses may reduce one avoidable source of threat while the underlying barriers are assessed.

Trust is built through repeated experiences of respectful interaction, competence, integrity, and personal regard (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). In practice, this means practitioners listening before proposing solutions, being explicit about what is known and unknown, keeping agreed actions, and explaining institutional constraints honestly. Parents contribute detailed knowledge of a child's history, behaviour outside school, and signs of distress (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014; Pushor, 2012). Practitioners contribute knowledge of the school environment, including peer and curriculum demands, available adjustments, and patterns observed in the setting (Solvason & Proctor, 2021). Neither perspective is complete on its own. Treating these forms of knowledge as complementary supports a move from school-defined involvement toward reciprocal engagement and a shared formulation, rather than a contest over whose account is correct.

3.3 Functional understanding without blame

Kearney and Silverman's (1990) functional model of school refusal behaviour remains influential, because it asks what may be maintaining non-attendance rather than assuming a single cause. The model identifies four possible functions: avoiding school-related stimuli that provoke distress; escaping aversive social or evaluative situations; obtaining attention or reassurance from significant others; and gaining access to preferred activities or other tangible reinforcement outside school (Kearney & Silverman, 1990). These functions may overlap and change over time. Later work places functional assessment within a broader understanding of the clinical, family, school, and systemic

contexts of absenteeism (Kearney, 2008). Used cautiously, functional thinking can direct attention to patterns, antecedents, consequences, and possible sources of distress without reducing the child's difficulties to a single explanation. Used simplistically, however, functional thinking can locate responsibility within the child or family and obscure the wider conditions shaping attendance. Recent reviews therefore emphasise the importance of considering school practices, family circumstances, unmet needs, and systemic constraints alongside individual functions (Alaimo & Kelly, 2025; McDonald & Pervez, 2025).

An ecological and functional formulation should therefore consider several levels at once. These include the child's development and health; relationships at home and school; classroom, curriculum, sensory, and peer demands; family resources and constraints; and policy or service conditions (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Corcoran et al., 2022). The purpose is not to allocate fault but to identify changeable conditions and decide who can act on them. Research and practice literature support individualized and reflective responses that also attend to systemic conditions (Alaimo & Kelly, 2025; McDonald & Pervez, 2025), while the limited intervention evidence indicates that claims about effectiveness should remain cautious (McDonald & Pervez, 2025).

3.4 Emotional labour and relational capacity

Relational practice requires emotional labour: practitioners regulate their own responses, convey steadiness, hear distress without becoming defensive, and remain attentive to both the child and family while meeting institutional responsibilities (Hargreaves, 1998). This work is not an unlimited personal resource. Primary staff describe the strain of dealing with attendance difficulties, uncertainty about what will help, and the impact of constrained services and workload (Alaimo & Kelly, 2025; Cunningham et al., 2022). A resource that asks practitioners to listen more carefully is therefore insufficient unless leaders also protect time, provide supervision or consultation, clarify roles, and coordinate external support.

Relational practice can also reproduce inequality. Expectations about an engaged or cooperative parent may privilege families who communicate in familiar professional forms, can attend meetings during working hours, speak fluent English, or trust public institutions (Baquedano-López et al., 2013). Hierarchical school-parent relationships and practical barriers can restrict participation even when schools describe their approach as partnership (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Solvason & Cliffe, 2023). Practitioners should ask not only whether an invitation was offered, but whether the family could realistically accept it.

4. Practice context and resource-development approach

4.1 Status of the work

This project began as practice development in response to concerns about EBSNA encountered through supporting teacher trainees in a higher education environment. It resulted in working with a primary school in England to produce *Reconnecting with School: Practical Support for Practitioners and Parents of Primary Pupils Experiencing Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance* available through the link at the end of this document. In this article we reflect on the development of this resource, which was intended to make research and guidance easier to discuss across home and school. In sharing our experience we encourage practitioners to consider ways that practice might be developed within their own schools.

This is not presented as empirical research. Informal conversations with parents, practitioners, and professional colleagues helped identify recurring practice concerns, including blame, emotional burden, inconsistent terminology, and the accessibility of information. These conversations took place through established professional networks and informal community or family encounters. Although this dialogue prompted the discussion points and actions that follow, we do not replicate these conversations in any way, as research data or findings. Additionally, no claims of representativeness are presented in this work, we simply present our own development in understanding in the hope that it might be useful to others.

4.2 Translating evidence and consultation into the booklet

Resource development proceeded through six linked activities rather than a formal research project:

1. A practice problem was defined: parents and practitioners needed a shared, accessible starting point for discussing emotionally related attendance difficulty.
2. Relevant research, statutory guidance, and practice resources were reviewed to identify recurring principles and areas of uncertainty.
3. Informal consultation discovered issues of blame, emotional burden, accessibility, and differing expectations between home and school.
4. Content was organized around understanding EBSNA, noticing early signs, exploring interacting influences, communicating across home and school, planning support, and locating further help.
5. Language and activities were revised to reduce deficit framing, explain professional reasoning, and invite reflection rather than prescribe a single response.
6. The partner primary school were invited to review the booklet before completion, in an advisory capacity.

4.3 Ethical considerations

No formal ethics review or institutional determination was sought because the activity was undertaken as practice development rather than human-participant research. No participants were recruited, no research interviews were conducted, and no dataset was created. The present paper does not include identifiable information, quotations, individual cases, or claims derived from systematic analysis of the informal conversations. The school and individuals are not named.

This boundary also limits what can be claimed. Informal consultation can influence professional reflection, but it cannot be retrospectively converted into research evidence. Any future study of the booklet's acceptability, implementation, or outcomes will obtain institutional ethics review before recruitment and use appropriate information, consent or assent, safeguarding, confidentiality, and data-management procedures. Children did not directly contribute to the development of the booklet and this is a significant limitation. Ideally, children should be involved in the future evaluation of the booklet's effectiveness, and any future revision should involve children with varied attendance experiences in age-appropriate co-design. We do not assume that parent or practitioner accounts substitute for children's perspectives and see this as an important facet of future development.

5. The Building Bridges practice framework

The framework below is a reflective implementation aid, not an empirically validated model. It translates the relational and ecological principles that arose through literature and dialogue into six questions for practice. Practitioners should use it alongside safeguarding procedures, attendance duties, special educational needs and disability obligations, and advice from relevant specialists (see Figure 1).

5.1 Notice and establish a point of contact

Early signs may include distress before school, physical complaints, difficulty entering or remaining in the setting, increasing lateness, withdrawal, changes in behaviour, or absence linked to particular days, lessons, people, or transitions. The first practical task is to agree who will coordinate communication. A named contact reduces repetition and the risk that families receive contradictory messages. The contact should clarify urgent safeguarding or health concerns and distinguish immediate risk from problems requiring longer-term formulation.

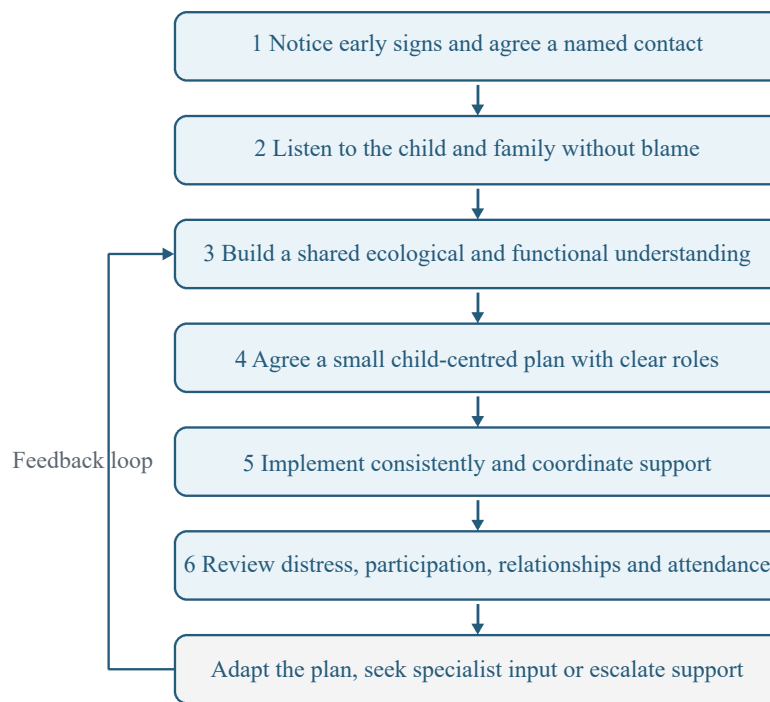


Figure 1. A six-step reflective process for using the Building Bridges approach. Review can lead back to renewed understanding rather than simply intensifying the original plan

5.2 Listen and create psychological safety

The opening conversation should aim to understand before persuading. Practitioners can ask what the child communicates at home, what patterns the family has noticed, what has already been tried, and what makes contact with school easier or harder. Language matters: concern can be expressed without implying that the child is choosing distress or that the parent is encouraging absence. Practitioners should explain attendance responsibilities transparently, but legal information should not displace listening, and should not be used as a threat.

For younger children, listening may involve play, drawing, visual choices, observation, familiar adults, and short conversations rather than a formal meeting. The child should not be asked to carry messages between adults or to resolve adult disagreement. Where separation-related distress is a significant feature, adults should agree a brief, predictable handover, identify a trusted adult to receive the child, and decide how reassurance will be communicated without repeatedly renegotiating the plan in front of the child.

5.3 Develop a shared ecological and functional understanding

Families and practitioners can map what happens before, during, and after difficult attendance episodes and consider factors at child, family, school, and system levels.

The questions are practical: When is distress greatest? What does the child anticipate? What temporarily reduces distress? Which relationships, environments, sensory demands, learning tasks, transitions, health needs, or external pressures may contribute? What strengths and safe relationships are already present?

The resulting information and any plans made as a result should be written in plain language and checked with the child and family. It should distinguish evidence from hypothesis. For example, a pattern may suggest that an unstructured transition is difficult, but this should not be treated as established fact until explored. Shared formulation is valuable when it broadens possible action; it becomes harmful if it merely gives professional language to an assumption about the child or parent.

5.4 Agree a brief, child-centred plan

The plan should connect each proposed action to an identified barrier or protective factor. It might include a predictable arrival routine, access to a trusted adult, environmental or curriculum adjustments, planned communication, a graded increase in participation, or coordinated input from health, educational psychology, or special educational needs services. Responsibilities, frequency, review date, and contingency arrangements should be explicit.

Attendance is an important outcome, but it should not be the only immediate indicator of success. For a distressed child, early progress may also include reduced anticipatory

distress, increased engagement in a part of school they experience as safe, participation in planning, improved communication, or quicker emotional recovery after attending. This broader view does not normalize prolonged absence. Rather, it can help practitioners and parents assess whether support is reducing distress and making the route towards more consistent attendance manageable, even when initial improvements in attendance are modest.

5.5 Implement consistently and coordinate support

Consistency does not mean rigidity. It means that adults understand the current plan, use compatible language, and know when adaptation is allowed. Any changes should be communicated to the child and family in advance where possible. A single plan should coordinate school, family, and external professionals so that families are not required to reconcile incompatible advice themselves.

The emotional labour of implementation should be recognized by managers. Leaders need to allocate time for the named contact, provide access to consultation, and ensure that responsibility does not fall on one individual without the support or resource to enable this. Where the plan depends on resources that are unavailable, this should be acknowledged, and recorded openly, rather than reframed as a failure of family engagement.

5.6 Review, learn, and adapt

Review should return to the shared formulation. Dialogue between the family and practitioners can ask what (if anything) changed, whose perspective is missing, whether distress moved rather than reduced, and whether the plan altered the conditions maintaining non-attendance. If progress is limited, it should be discussed whether change, or patience, is needed. The team may need to revise its hypotheses, make different adjustments, involve specialist services, or address a systemic barrier.

Our hope is that the booklet will support these conversations by offering general prompts and accessible explanations. It cannot replace assessment, professional judgment, statutory duties, or individualized intervention. Nor can it guarantee improved relationships or attendance; but it can help by preparing the ground for this.

6. Critical considerations for implementation

6.1 Systemic and policy constraints

Relational attendance practice operates within competing expectations. Schools must promote attendance and act where absence persists, while also making reasonable adjustments, safeguarding wellbeing, and responding to

mental or physical ill health and special educational needs (DfE, 2026). Accountability measures can focus attention and resources, but they can also narrow conversations when staff feel judged primarily by attendance figures. Families may experience the resulting urgency as blame even where individual practitioners intend support.

Capacity is a substantive condition of practice. Meetings, individualized planning, communication, staff supervision, and multi-agency coordination require time. External services may have thresholds or waiting lists; staffing changes can disrupt trusted relationships; and schools vary in access to educational psychology, mental-health, family-support, and alternative provision. Research with school staff identifies emotional and resource strain, while analyses of guidance show inconsistency across local systems (Alaimo & Kelly, 2025; Cunningham et al., 2022; Hammond-Price et al., 2025; Malley et al., 2026; Solvason et al., 2026). A booklet cannot resolve these structural limitations.

Socioeconomic and cultural conditions also shape partnership. Transport, housing insecurity, work schedules, digital access, language, disability, previous discrimination, and confidence dealing with institutions affect participation. A relational approach must therefore include practical accessibility: flexible meeting formats, interpreters where needed, clear language, attention to cost and transport, and more than one way for a child or parent to contribute.

6.2 Partnership does not guarantee attendance

Positive partnership is valuable in its own right, but it is not sufficient for every attendance difficulty. Adults may develop a respectful relationship and still disagree about risk, pace, or the meaning of behaviour. A child may remain distressed despite coordinated support. Family-school collaboration cannot compensate for an unsafe peer environment, unsuitable curriculum, unmet health need, inadequate specialist provision, or material hardship. In some cases, safeguarding or legal responsibilities require action that a family does not welcome.

The evidence base also warrants caution. The small number and variable quality of UK school-partnered intervention studies do not support firm conclusions about effectiveness (McDonald & Pervez, 2025). Similarly, trauma-informed principles such as safety, collaboration, and empowerment may be useful for reflection, but evidence for whole-school trauma-informed approaches remains limited and conceptually inconsistent (Maynard et al., 2019; Watson & Astor, 2025). This is why the advice given in the booklet uses relational and psychologically informed language and avoids claiming that it is a trauma-informed intervention.

6.3 Implications for practitioners and leaders

For classroom practitioners and attendance or pastoral

leads, we hope that the framework offers a disciplined pause between noticing absence and deciding what to do. It asks adults to gather perspectives, name uncertainty, connect actions to a shared formulation, and review more than an attendance percentage. For leaders, the central implication is organizational: relationship-based practice requires protected time, stable responsibility, reflective support, and routes to specialist advice. For teacher educators, EBSNA provides a context in which to teach communication under pressure, ecological formulation, ethical boundaries, and the emotional labour of working with families.

Our intention is that the framework should be adapted to context, not adopted wholesale. Settings need to align it with local policy, safeguarding arrangements, provision, community needs, and children's developmental stages. However, adaptation should preserve the core commitments: non-blaming inquiry, child participation, complementary expertise, transparent constraints, and iterative review.

7. Limitations and future evaluation

This commentary has important limitations. It reflects practice development led by one author in relation to one primary school in England and the source selection was purposive rather than systematic. The booklet, although reviewed by the partner school, has not been formally piloted or independently evaluated. (And, as such, we welcome all feedback). We also recognize that our own professional and parental positions and experiences shape which concerns are noticed and how resources were interpreted.

A feasible next step is an ethically approved, staged pilot. For the first stage older children, parents, practitioners, and relevant specialists could review the booklet for language, accessibility, developmental suitability, cultural responsiveness, and potential harms. Second, a small number of diverse primary schools could test the feasibility by trialing the booklet, documenting who uses the resource, when, with what support, and any necessary adaptations that may be required. Third, mixed methods data collection could examine acceptability and possible change using brief pre- and post-use measures based upon shared understanding or relational trust, interviews or focus groups, and implementation records. Attendance, participation, and distress indicators could be explored as contextual outcomes, but as was mentioned earlier in this work, causal attribution would require a stronger comparative design. It would be vital that the evaluation report unintended effects, non-use, disagreement, and resource demands as well as positive experiences.

8. Conclusion

The value of *Building Bridges* lies, at present, in its

practice questions, not in demonstrated effectiveness. For primary-aged children experiencing emotionally related attendance difficulty, the quality and coordination of adult responses may shape whether school feels predictable, whether families disclose concerns, and whether support addresses conditions across home, school, and wider systems. A developmental and ecological lens helps practitioners avoid locating the problem solely within the child or parent, while a relational lens highlights the trust and emotional labour required to work through uncertainty.

The *Reconnecting with School* booklet offers one possible aid to that work. It should be used cautiously, alongside individualized assessment and statutory responsibilities, and evaluated before claims are made about outcomes. The practical invitation is modest: notice early, listen without blame, build a shared and revisable understanding, agree feasible actions, implement them consistently, and review what the child and adults are experiencing. Future co-design and evaluation, especially with children, are needed to establish whether the resource is acceptable, useful, and capable of contributing to better support.

Supplementary materials

Reconnecting with School: Practical Support for Practitioners and Parents of Primary Pupils Experiencing Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance: <https://primaryeducation.on.worc.ac.uk/2026/07/building-bridges-from-conversation-to-collaboration/>.

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Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

The authors declare that generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools or AI-assisted technologies were used during the preparation of this manuscript. AI tools were limited to the following purposes: language improvement and formatting assistance. All AI-assisted outputs were critically reviewed, verified, and revised by the authors. Generative AI tools were not used to replace the authors' scientific judgment, generate unsupported scientific claims, interpret results independently, or assume responsibility for any part of the research. The authors remain fully responsible for the

originality, accuracy, integrity, and ethical compliance of the manuscript.

Author contributions

Kate Howen was responsible for the conceptualization, resource development, and original drafting of the manuscript. Carla Solvason contributed to the literature review and manuscript development. Both authors contributed to reviewing and editing the manuscript and approved the final submitted version.

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Informed consent statement

Not applicable. No participants were recruited for research, and the article contains no identifiable personal information, individual cases, or attributable quotations.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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