



Helping Your Child Face Fears

BEHAVIORAL EXPOSURE

An important step in helping your child manage irrational fears involves facing feared situations or places. It is normal for children and teens to want to avoid the things they fear. However, avoidance prevents them from learning that feared situations or places are not dangerous.

The process of facing fears is called EXPOSURE. Exposure involves having your child repeatedly go into feared situations until he or she feels less anxious. Exposure is not dangerous and will not make the fear worse. After awhile, the anxiety will naturally lessen.

Starting with situations that are less scary, children and teens work their way up to facing things that cause them a great deal of anxiety. Over time, they build up confidence in those situations and may come to enjoy them. This process often happens naturally. A child or teen who is afraid of the water takes swimming lessons every week and practices putting feet and legs in the water, then the whole body and, finally, diving underwater. Children and teens with a fear of water can learn to love swimming. The same process occurs when children and teens learn to ride a bike, skate, or drive a car.

Exposure is one of the most effective ways of overcoming fears. However, it takes some planning, encouragement, modeling and rewards.

How to Do It!

Step 1. Understanding

- Help your child understand the importance of facing fears.
- Use an example. Ask your child the following question:

“Tim is afraid of the water, but really wants to spend time with his friends at the swimming pool. What can he do to stop being afraid of the water?”

- Most children and teens understand that, in order to stop being afraid of something, they need to face it.
- You can give your child the following explanation to help him or her understand.

“It is important for you to face your fears so that you can learn that those situations are safe. Although it can be scary at first, with practice you will feel less anxious. You can start with some things that are less scary and take small steps towards facing the things that are scarier. Over time, you will feel better in those situations and may end up really enjoying them.”

Step 2. Make a list

- Working with your child or teen, make a list of situations, places or objects that he or she fears.
- For example, if your child is afraid to be away from you or to do things on his or her own, the list might include: staying at a friend's house while you leave for 10 minutes; playing alone for 20 minutes; or getting dropped off at a friend's birthday party for 30 minutes. If your child is afraid of social situations, the list might include: saying "hi" to a classmate; asking the teacher a question; or calling a friend on the phone.

Helpful Hints:



- **Group Fears Together.** Sometimes children or teens have a lot of different fears, so it can help to group similar fears together. For example, your child might have a fear of bugs, as well as a fear of going to school and being away from parents. Common fears among children include: being separated from parents or family members; interacting with adults or other children; physical danger (swimming or riding a bike); fears related to the natural environment (animals or insects); and fears related to medical procedures (doctor, dentist, injections).

- **Work together.** Work with your child to come up with a list of feared situations. Although younger children may need more help, some teens may prefer to do it on their own. You may want to ask how much help they want.

Step 3. Build a Fear Ladder

- Once you have made a list, help your child arrange things from the least scary to the most scary. You can do this by having your child rate how much fear he or she has for each situation on the list from "0" (No fear) to "10" (Tons of fear). Use the [Fear Thermometer](#) to help your child make the ratings. Younger children may not be able to give a rating, but can usually tell you which situations are easier and which are more difficult. Once your child has rated each situation, use the Fear Ladder Form to make a final list. For younger children, you may want to use a shorter version [Hopping Down My Worry Path](#).

Helpful Hints:



- Ask your child to identify a specific goal (such as sleeping alone in his or her own room), and then list the steps needed to achieve that goal (such as sleeping in mom and dad's *room on the floor*; *sleeping in one's own room with door open*, etc.). See [Examples of Fear Ladders](#) for some ideas on building your child's Fear Ladder.

- If your child has a lot of different fears, build separate ladders for each fear theme.

Reward Brave Behavior

- It's not easy facing fears. Using rewards can encourage brave behavior.
- Children and teens respond to praise and encouragement. For example, you can say: "You did it! You played at your friend's by yourself." "You did a great job of introducing yourself to the other kids!" and "I'm proud of you for sleeping in your own room."
- When your child is facing strong fears, it may be helpful to use specific rewards as motivation to achieve

- Each ladder should include a whole range of situations. The ladder should identify some things your child can do now with some anxiety, some things he or she can do now with moderate anxiety and, finally, the things he or she finds too difficult to do now. It is important to start really small and take gradual steps.
- Some things on the ladder can be broken up into smaller steps. For example, if your child is afraid to talk to classmates, this could be broken up into a number of steps such as saying "hi" to a classmate, asking a quick question, and then talking about his or her weekend.
- It can also be important to consider other factors that may affect fear level. Some examples include: length of time (e.g., talking to a classmate for 30 seconds is probably less scary than talking for five minutes); time of day (e.g., spending time alone in one's room in the afternoon versus evening); environment (e.g., swimming at local pool versus swimming in a lake); and who is with your child (e.g., going over to a friend's place with mom versus an older brother).
- See [Examples of Fear Ladders](#) for some ideas about building your child's fear ladder.

Step 4. Facing Fears (Exposure)

- Starting with the situation that causes the least anxiety, encourage your child to repeatedly engage in that activity (e.g., repeatedly saying "hi" to an unfamiliar person) until he or she starts to feel less anxious doing it. If the situation is one that your child can remain in for a period of time (such as being close to a dog), encourage him or her to stay in the situation long enough to see anxiety lessen (e.g., standing next to a dog for 20-30 minutes). Once your child is able to enter that situation without experiencing much anxiety, he or she can move on to the next thing on the list.
- For some children or teens, it can help to model behaviors ahead of time. For example, practice with your child saying "hi" to someone or model petting a dog.
- Encourage your child to track his or her progress. See the [Facing Fears](#) Form, which helps your child identify how anxious he or she was before and after facing the feared situation, and what he or she learned. Make copies and have your child fill one out each time he or she faces fears.

Helpful Hints:

- **Don't Rush!** It can be very scary facing the things one fears. Be encouraging and recognize that your child needs to go at his or her own pace.

Step 5. Practice

- It is important to practice on a regular basis. Some things can be practiced daily (e.g., spending time alone in a part of the house without the parent in the same room), while other things can only be done once in a while (e.g., sleeping at a friend's place). However, the more often a child practices the faster the fear will fade!

Step 6. a goal.

For example, offer a special gift (DVD, CD, book, treat, toy, craft) or fun activity (rent a movie or game, go to movies, amusement park, go out for lunch or dinner, play a game, make a special meal together). Once your child has successfully faced a specific fear, specific rewards may be phased out, but don't stop praising!

- Encourage your child to reward him or herself with positive self-talk (for example, "I really tried hard!") and enjoyable activities (for example, watching a favorite movie) after facing a feared situation.

Helpful Hints:

- **Plan!** It is important to plan out rewards in advance and to be consistent in using them.
- **Record it!** For younger children, you can make up a poster that charts their progress and award stars each time they face their fears. This can help them work towards bigger rewards.