

Tell Fear to Take a Hike: 5 Strategies to Help Anxious Children Embrace Summer Activities

It's that time of year again. School is out and kids are bursting ahead to discover the joys and adventures of summer. But for some like Jenny, anticipation is clouded by anxiety. Jenny struggles with Generalized Anxiety Disorder and Separation Anxiety. She can worry excessively or even panic at the thought of not being close to home and parents. She desires freedom but finds herself chained to the ball of fear. She is not alone.

Each year, over 8,000 kids head to summer camp while millions more attend day camps, park and recreation activities, family vacations, amusement parks, or just hike to the local fishing hole. For most children, these ventures are exciting. For an anxious child, just getting out the door can be a courageous feat.

All anxiety is comprised of distorted *thoughts*, uncomfortable physical *feelings*, and *coping behaviors*, the most common of which is avoidance. By practicing these five strategies, you can empower your child to address these three elements and overcome anxiety.

1. *Visualization*. Each day for ten to fifteen minutes, have your child find a comfortable spot to close their eyes and picture themselves doing the fear-provoking activity. In their mind, they should imagine themselves being strong, happy and capable to handle the situation. This should be done in detail, starting from when they wake up the morning of the event, going to the event, participating in the event, and leaving the event. Through each stage, they visualize being what they *want* to be, not what they fear they might be. They should also picture themselves recovering from a setback of fear, seeing themselves overcoming it and returning to the flow of the event.

2. *Previewing*. Anxiety thrives on the unknown. Dispelling fear through previewing an event can greatly reduce a child's anxiety. Arrange a tour of a summer camp, day camp, or site of a planned event. If traveling, find lots of pictures of their destination. If they fear doing something such as flying, sailing, riding a rollercoaster or camping outdoors, talk through in detail what that experience will be like. Promote their ability to handle it in a calm, relaxed manner.

3. *Strategizing*. Anxious children cope better when they have a plan for how to handle their anxieties. Put the plan in place when previewing a site. Incorporate things to do, people to turn to, and safe places to go to calm their fears.

4. *Exposure*. Anxieties lessen as a person develops *tolerance* to the feared person, place, or thing. Just as a vaccination exposes the immune system to a small amount of virus in order to build up a tolerance to it, so the brain also must be exposed to the anxiety producing stimulus in order to build up a tolerance. This can be accomplished rapidly or gradually. Imagine an icy mountain lake on a hot June day. Jenny can either jump in and experience the shock of the cold water for a minute or two until her body adapts to it, or she can gradually expose her body to the water over several minutes as she slowly treads

into it. The processes of exposure vary, but the result is the same. Similarly, your child needs to step into the feared experience in order to develop a tolerance to it.

5. *Follow-up*. Do not omit this important step! By reviewing the child's progress, you can dispute any distorted beliefs about the dreaded event and their inability to cope with it. Validate/highlight the child's inner strength and the importance of following the strategies to successfully face their fears. Make this a positive, high-fiving time to reinforce their progress.

If Jenny successfully practices these strategies, chances are good that she will have a great summer and experience the joys of being free from her fears.

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