

ANXIETY AND AUTISM

Navigating anxiety with your child can be tricky and sometimes overwhelming. There are both medication and behavior therapy options for treating children with anxiety. For more information on medication options, speak to your child's pediatrician. Here we provide you with some resources to get started in understanding anxiety and the cognitive behavioral as well as behavioral therapy options for helping a child with significant anxiety.

WHAT IS CBT?

Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a problem-solving, goal-directed therapy that examines and treats the relationships between thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that are maintaining the excessive anxiety and preventing adaptive coping. CBT is an empirically-supported treatment for generalized anxiety disorder, separation anxiety disorder, panic disorder, social anxiety disorder, and phobias. **Exposure and Response Prevention (ERP)** is an empirically supported version of CBT for individuals with obsessive-compulsive disorder. These treatments typically occur on an outpatient basis with weekly sessions with a licensed professional. Activities in between sessions and parental involvement are key components in helping a child learn the skills and generalize them across environments.

There are two empirically-supported, cognitive-behavioral treatment programs that have been specifically designed to address anxiety in autistic children. These programs are not yet widely available; however, they may be offered in your community now or in the near future.

- **Behavioral Interventions for Anxiety in Children with Autism (BIACA)**; Wood, Drahota, Sze, Har, et al., 2009) – BIACA is an individualized CBT manual-based program with a modular treatment algorithm and a high level of parental involvement.
- **Facing Your Fears (FYF)**; Reaven, Blakely-Smith, Nichols, & Hepburn, 2011) – FYF is a group CBT manual-based program.

HOW DO I KNOW IF CBT IS A GOOD FIT FOR MY CHILD?

Motivation to Participate – the majority of the work (e.g., exposures, generalization) is done out of the session from week to week. If the child refuses to participate, parent training can occur but waiting until the child is more willing is sometimes necessary.

Any Co-occurring Conditions – if your child is not able to attend to the material even with breaks and activities infused or if their language level impacts their ability to understand the material, other interventions might have to be considered first.

Level of Cognitive Functioning – cognitive skills necessary for non-adapted forms of CBT include emotion recognition, self-reflection, and meta-cognition (i.e., thinking about thinking), perspective taking, verbal ability, short-and long-term memory, and causal reasoning.

Parental Involvement – all children need assistance with generalizing the skills learned in session, particularly children with autism. Parents must be willing to participate in all or parts of the sessions and homework, depending on the child's age and functioning level.

HOW DO I FIND A THERAPIST WHO DOES CBT?

Ask your pediatrician or developmental and behavioral pediatrician for a referral to a therapist who provides CBT to children and adolescents with anxiety disorders, and who has experience working with individuals with autism spectrum disorder.

To search for providers in your area, enter your zip code at <https://therapists.psychologytoday.com>. Through this resource, you can select "Cognitive Behavioral (CBT)" under Treatment Orientation, and filter by insurance, age, autism specialty, etc., as well as read the profiles of potential therapists.

CBT RESOURCES FOR PARENTS

COPING CAT: CHILD ANXIETY TALES

Coping Cat is a comprehensive CBT treatment program, performed following a manualized method with a psychologist. Some therapists are able to adapt Coping Cat for children with ASD. Coping Cat provides an online parent program called *Child Anxiety Tales*, with information, tools, and resources for helping your child. This program can be found at http://copingcatparents.com/Child_Anxiety_Tales. Some parents find it helpful to start this online parent educational program while they are waiting for their child to start CBT or in conjunction with their child's CBT program.

BOOKS

ANXIETY AND PHOBIAS

Freeing Your Child from Anxiety, Revised and Updated Edition: Practical Strategies to Overcome Fears, Worries, and Phobias and Be Prepared for Life - from Toddlers to Teens by Tamar Chansky

What to Do When You Worry Too Much: A Kid's Guide to Overcoming Anxiety by Dawn Huebner and Bonnie Matthews

OBSESSIVE-COMPULSIVE DISORDER

Freeing Your Child from Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder: A Powerful, Practical Program for Parents of Children and Adolescents by Tamar Chansky

What to Do When Your Brain Gets Stuck: A Kid's Guide to Overcoming OCD by Dawn Huebner and Bonnie Matthews

VIDEO

Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) for anxiety in children with neurodevelopmental disorders, a talk given by Dr. Breanna Winder-Patel at the UC Davis MIND Institute's 2015 Summer Institute of Neurodevelopmental Disorders, gives an overview of anxiety in ASD children and details of CBT. A recording of this talk is available at http://www.ucdmc.ucdavis.edu/mindinstitute/videos/video_summerinstitute.html#2015

WHAT IS AN ALTERNATIVE IF CBT IS NOT THE RIGHT FIT FOR MY CHILD?

Cognitive behavioral therapy may not be the right fit for all children. Instead, the focus may simply be *Behavioral Therapy*. Sticking to a behavioral approach may benefit children with lower cognitive functioning or difficulty following the tasks in a CBT setting. Strategies for addressing anxiety using a behavioral approach include use of social stories, visual schedules, "if-then" boards, and more. Speak with your child's behavioral therapist to discuss which strategies may benefit your child.

BEHAVIORAL RESOURCES FOR PARENTS

AUTISM SPEAKS TOOLKITS

Autism Speaks provides toolkits for common fears and phobias such as getting blood drawn and going to a dentist or eye doctor. These toolkits are free for download and can be found at <https://www.autismspeaks.org/family-services/tool-kits>.

SOCIAL THINKING CURRICULUMS

Superflex: A Superhero Social Thinking Curriculum (www.socialthinking.com) by Stephanie Madrigal and Michelle Garcia Winner – this program is designed to help children develop further awareness of their own thinking and social behaviors and strategies to regulate their behavior.

Zones of Regulation (www.socialthinking.com) by Leah Kuypers – this program is designed to teach children how to regulate their actions, leading to increased control and problem solving abilities.