

Exposure/Facing Up Skills: FEAR LADDER

What: Develop a list of feared situations/items that will form the basis of the exposure steps.

Why? It provides a way of facing up to feared situations gradually, to improve the child's functioning, decrease fear, and increase confidence in handling related triggers

How to teach these skills...

Tell about it: Explain how making a fear ladder is a really important part of your work together, and the more specific the steps in the fear ladder are, the better the child will do on making his anxiety go away.

Do: Can use handout that shows ladder with “rungs” for writing in feared situations; 3 x 5 notecards or post-it notes, with each situation written on a separate notecard; or a hand written list. Include about 8 – 10 steps Child **rank orders** situations according to how difficult they would be (using scale from 0-10, faces pain scale or other measure).

When creating the fear ladder, **stick to one main problem or target** (e.g., if separation anxiety is the primary concern, then the list should contain only items related to separating from parent). You can develop a new fear ladder for other problem areas that you work on later.

Points to Remember:

- Make copies of fear ladder once it's complete so that you can have child and caregiver do the steps (face the situation) and monitor fear level pre and post exposure.. This helps to see if the items are becoming less fearful for the child.
- Include parents/caregivers in developing the fear ladder, when possible.
- Include a range of situations with differing intensity levels. Need more rungs that are easier or harder? ASK: “What would make this activity a little easier?” “What would make this activity harder?”
- Choose the first exposures carefully! Success on the first exposure is key to getting the child's buy-in and building hope that treatment can work.

Special Cases:

- PANIC SYMPTOMS: Items on fear ladder should include physical sensations and situations that cue panic attacks.
- GENERALIZED ANXIETY DISORDER: Try imaginal exposure to the “worst case scenario” or feared outcome that the child is worrying about. Also, see whether worrying is a way of AVOIDING some situation or task that should be faced using exposure.
- RITUALS/COMPULSIONS: These may produce long fear ladders.