

Anxiety- Free Kids

*Second
Edition*

An Interactive Guide for Parents and Children



- *Help Your Child Become Happy and Worry-Free*
- *Relieve Your Child's Excessive Anxieties and Phobias*
- *Foster Interaction With Success Strategies for Parents and Kids*

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on Childhood Anxiety*

Making Your Team and Team Goals

Kimberly and her parents learned that she has generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) and that she will need to learn how to relax her body, change the ways she thinks, and face her fears. She realized that there were a lot of things she avoided doing because they made her feel afraid or uncomfortable. Kimberly and her mom worked together to make a list of all of the situations that cause Kimberly to feel anxious or worried. They made the list into a ladder, so Kimberly could see the different steps she would take to overcome her anxiety, and note her progress along the way. Kimberly decided that her first step would be to reduce the number of times she checked on her dog to only twice a day.

IN this chapter, your child will learn the following:

1. the “Face Your Fears” philosophy,
2. a case example of Thelma, who overcame her separation anxiety by facing her fears, and
3. how to form a team and make a ladder (hierarchy) for achieving goals.

These topics will be addressed in this chapter, and the exercise that you will complete with your child after you each read Chapter 2 of your respective books will be discussed. This chapter also will include a section on the importance of not providing reassurance.

This is a shorter chapter to read, but the exercise that you and your child will complete is longer than most of the other exercises

in this book. The exercise (Making Your Team and Team Goals) is going to be fun and will set the stage for your child's treatment goals: facing his or her fears. It is through facing his own fears that your child will learn to overcome them and break free from the cycle of anxiety. When your child avoids situations that evoke anxiety, this is called *avoidance behavior* because she is avoiding something in reaction to the anxiety (in acceptance and commitment therapy, it's called *experiential avoidance*, which is where the goal of tolerating the unpleasant emotions and sensations come in). Think about it; it makes sense. Your child's mentality is akin to:

When I _____ (separate from Mom, raise my hand in class, go near a dog), I feel completely scared, threatened, nervous, and/or terrified, so of course I don't want to do it again.

However, each time that your child avoids something because it makes her feel anxious, *the anxiety wins* and becomes reinforced and strengthened, and *your child loses*. But each time your child does something that makes her feel anxious, *she wins* and *the anxiety loses*. It is your child against the anxiety (in the kids' companion book I call this, "You vs. Anxiety"), and it is certain that as your child faces her fears, she *will* win!

Although you learned a little about Thelma in the last chapter, the following is directly from your child's book and gives more detail about Thelma's experience, as well as her process of facing her fears:

Eight-year-old Thelma was one of the children I worked with in therapy. She was very nice, very smart, and very nervous about being separated from her mom. If her mom went out in the front of the house to take out the trash, Thelma would become anxious—her heart would beat fast, and she would stop doing whatever she was doing to go

to the window and watch her mom. Thelma would worry that something bad would happen to her and that she wouldn't come back. Thelma also did not like to be in a different room than her mom, and when her mom would go in another room, Thelma would ask her to sing a song so Thelma would always know where she was. She refused to sleep in her own bed at night even though her mom would try to get her to sleep alone, but Thelma would cry and cry and beg her mom to be able to sleep with her. Sometimes, Thelma's mom needed to go out without her and a babysitter would come over; this upset Thelma so much that she would get sick and throw up. As soon as her mom would come home, Thelma would feel better. This made it very hard for her mom to leave the house without her!

Thelma had separation anxiety, which meant that she got very nervous and worried when she was separated from her mom and worried about bad things happening to her mom. She did her best to *avoid* being separated from her, because this was the thing that made her feel so scared. Each time Thelma was clinging onto her mother and *avoided* being separated from her, *the anxiety would win and she would lose*. Even though staying near her mother helped her to feel better at the time, it actually made the anxiety much worse overall. Thelma learned that she had to face her fears to overcome them. How did she do it?

Thelma and her team (her mom, sister, and me, Dr. Zucker) worked together to make a list of all of the things that felt scary to her and that were hard to do. Then, Thelma and I put the list in order, from easiest to hardest, and wrote them all on a poster board, in the form of a ladder. Each step on the ladder was one of the things that was hard for her to do. Thelma learned how to relax and take deep breaths, learned that her fears were not realistic (it was perfectly safe for her mom to take out the trash), and learned what to say to herself to help herself deal with the scary thoughts

and feelings. Thelma also learned that she was making thinking mistakes and worked on correcting them. Finally, she understood that she needed to face her fears, one step (or fear) at a time. She knew that when she was facing her fears, she would have to handle feeling some anxiety, but that the anxiety would go away with time and practice. Most importantly, Thelma was told that she would not have to take any of the steps until she was ready; Thelma would not be forced to face her fears. Instead, Thelma would be *encouraged* by her team to face her fear—she would be cheered on.

Thelma named her ladder “Climbing to Confidence” because she felt that her separation anxiety made her feel less confident about herself. By facing her fears, she would feel more confident. This is what Thelma’s ladder looked like:

Climbing to Confidence

(top)	Mom goes out of town without you.
	Go on a sleepover at a friend’s house.
	Mom goes out for the day without you.
	Go on a play date at a friend’s house.
	Mom goes out for 1 hour, then 2 hours without you.
	Mom goes out for 15 minutes, then 30 minutes without you.
	Sleep in your bed alone one night this week (then 2, 4, 5, and 7 nights).
	You use a public bathroom on your own (without Mom).
	Mom takes the trash out and you stay focused on the TV.
	Mom stays upstairs while you stay downstairs (for 5, 10, 15, and 30 minutes, then for 1 hour).

	Mom goes into other rooms without singing to you.
(bottom)	You stay in living room while Mom is in kitchen (for 5, 10, 15, 20, and 30 minutes).

Thelma practiced her relaxation and deep breathing, read her self-talk note cards, studied the thinking mistakes that she made and how to think more correct or realistic thoughts, and used her tools to master her worry. When she was ready, Thelma took the first step on her ladder: to go in the living room while her mom was in the nearby kitchen. She started slow, doing it for 5 minutes, then did it for longer periods of time—10, 15, 20, and 30 minutes—eventually being able to be in the living room alone for more than an hour! It wasn't easy, but it wasn't nearly as hard as she thought it would be. The first time she did it, she called to her mom, who popped her head in the living room and told Thelma that she was facing her fears and doing a fantastic job. She did it again and again, and then it became very easy, and did not cause her to feel scared or nervous at all. By the third time, she did not have to ask her mom to come in, and she learned to feel comfortable being in the living room alone. She was able to relax and enjoy watching TV and reading a book. Then Thelma felt ready to take the second step: her mother would go into other rooms in the house while Thelma was in the living room or her bedroom, but her mom would not sing to her. Again, she felt nervous and scared the first time they practiced, but it got easier and easier with each practice, and soon Thelma did not feel nervous when her mother left the room. Thelma remembered to do her breathing and read her self-talk note cards. She also told herself that feeling nervous was normal, but that it would get better, and it did.

Your child is told that like Thelma, she will build a ladder and team to help her face her fears. Looking at Thelma's ladder will help your child do this.

To be part of your child's team, you'll have to identify what you need to do to make the steps on the ladder go smoothly. As described above, Thelma's mom did many things to help Thelma to not feel anxious, including:

- ▶ singing to Thelma as she went in different rooms in the house,
- ▶ allowing Thelma to sleep with her in her bed, and
- ▶ avoiding leaving the house without her as much as possible.

These behaviors served to *accommodate* Thelma's anxiety. Unfortunately, such behaviors tend to make anxiety worse. Loving, caring, warm parents want to put their child at ease and make the anxiety lessen. Loving, caring, warm parents end up *unintentionally reinforcing* the anxiety by accommodating it and by providing their child with reassurance. It gives the child the message that her anxiety *is* that bad—it's so bad that it's worth addressing and focusing on and even changing the way we live. You know better than anyone what it's like for your child to turn to you to make everything OK. This may come out in the form of questions, such as, "What will we be doing tomorrow?" and "Will you definitely be home in an hour?" and "You still love me, right?" or it may come out in behavior, such as when your child throws a tantrum if he or she isn't allowed to sleep in bed with you. In an effort to soothe your child and make it better, you give into these demands—you answer the questions, you avoid doing things that are hard for your child to handle. The most wonderful parents do this instinctively. The funny thing is, it doesn't work! It provides temporary relief at best. Your child likely asks these questions repetitively, but the answers do not solve the worry or lessen the anxiety. Rather, the answers give the anxiety credibility.

You are the instrumental part of your child's team in facing his fears. As such an important team member, it is essential that your role entail being supportive and encouraging, but *not* accommodating. For example, Thelma's mother needed to learn that she

had to stop singing as she went in different rooms, could not allow Thelma to sleep with her (nor sleep with Thelma in Thelma's room), and could not stay at home to avoid prompting a meltdown. Her mother stopped giving these accommodations in a gradual way so as not to overwhelm Thelma. Once Thelma endorsed that she was ready to face her fears, her mom would meet her at that goal. For instance, once Thelma felt ready to have her mother leave the room without singing to her, Thelma's mother had to stop singing, even if during the exposure, Thelma got upset or requested that her mom sing.

In sum, you will stop accommodating your child's anxiety in a step-by-step fashion, as she takes the steps on her ladder, but you will need to be firm and consistent by not giving in. Instead of accommodating, you will cue her to use her strategies to manage the anxiety. At times it will be quite challenging and possibly very upsetting to you; however, it is necessary to end these accommodations in order for your child to become anxiety-free. Don't forget that one of the ways that you can help your child deal with not having you accommodate his anxiety is to comment on the process: "I know this is hard for you, and it's hard for me, too. A part of me wants to sing to you because I know it will make you feel better in that moment, but it will make the anxiety worse overall. It will make the anxiety bigger and stronger, and as a team, we need to fight it by not giving in. It will get easier with practice." Also, remind your child to use his tools by saying, "What can you do right now to help yourself feel better?" If he does not know, remind him of the strategies he can use: breathing, self-talk, conquer worry strategies, and so on.

The exercise for this chapter involves creating your child's team and the ladder (the hierarchy of anxiety-provoking situations). I deliberately placed the exercise of creating the hierarchy as one of the earliest projects because it frames the goals that your child is working toward. Below are two additional sample ladders and brief descriptions of the exposure process. Reviewing these will help you

better understand the process of making the ladder and ordering the steps from least to most anxiety-producing.

Sample 1: James (Snake Phobia)

Taking Steps With Snakes

(top)	Be near a live snake out of its cage up close (within 6 inches).
	Be near a live snake out of its cage from a distance (2 feet away).
	Be near a live snake in its cage up close (within 6 inches).
	Be near a live snake in its cage from a distance (2 feet away).
	Touch a snakeskin.
	Standing near a bush (and when it is rustled by an animal).
	Watching a video with snakes.
	Hearing the sounds of a snake (hissing sound).
	Looking at pictures of snakes.
	Reading about snakes.
(bottom)	Talking about snakes.

James and I made his ladder together and he was very involved in planning the exposures. For example, he went to the library and checked out books on snakes and movies with snake scenes. We watched a scene from *The Black Stallion* in which the boy in the movie had a terrifying encounter with a cobra snake, watched an informational video on how to care for your pet snake (not that James's goals included having a pet snake!), and watched the scene

from the *Harry Potter* movie that included an animated snake. When it came time to be near live snakes, James and I started with a trip to the National Zoo's Reptile House. At first, he kept his distance, but on our second visit, he felt comfortable enough to go close up to the glass enclosure. We went to the pet store three times together, and each time he got closer and closer to the live snake (we requested that the snake be taken out of the cage). James and I laughed about the fact that the same employee helped us every time, but had no idea what we were doing there. We could tell by the third visit that she thought it was a little strange that we wanted to see the snake, but not too close, and certainly did not want to touch or hold it (of course, the assumption in a pet store is that we would be interested in buying a snake). I told James that it's our right to go into the pet store, without buying (or even handling) the pet snakes! After our last trip to the pet store, I took James to an ice cream shop for an ice cream treat. He enjoyed this reward immensely (mainly the celebration and acknowledgement of his progress and success) and felt proud of himself for all of his hard work on facing his fears. Eventually, he visited the house of his friend with the pet snake. James attended a total of 12 sessions of CBT with me, and by the end, he no longer met the criteria for a snake phobia. His parents commented that James seemed happier and more confident in himself.

Sample 2: Ruth (OCD)

Getting Over Germs!

(top)

Using a public bathroom and rewearing your clothes the next day.

Using a public bathroom and washing your clothes only once afterward.

	Touching the door on the way out of the public bathroom with your hands.
	Touching the faucet in a public bathroom with your hands.
	Touching the stall door lock and handle of a public bathroom with your hands.
	Flushing the toilet in a public bathroom using your hands.
	Using a public bathroom and touching the door on the way in with your hands.
	Using a public bathroom.
	Eating from the school cafeteria.
	Eating homemade cookies and brownies.
	Eating from a “shared” bowl in a public place.
	Eating from a “shared” bowl at a party.
(bottom)	Eating at home with an “unclean” utensil (hand-washed only).

Ruth’s treatment involved a lot of education. First of all, she needed to understand that germs are neither dangerous nor threatening. She learned that we are exposed to germs every day and that we need germs to be healthy (I explained, in detail, that our bodies make special things called *antibodies* that prevent us from getting sick and that the only way our bodies can make these special antibodies is to be exposed to germs). Ruth also learned that germs are all over everything, a part of our environment, and that we cannot see germs. I emphasized that I was not trying to make her more anxious; rather, I was helping her understand that germs are a normal part of life. I explained the difference between being hygienic (washing our hands after using the bathroom and before and after meals, washing our clothes) and being irrational (refusing

to eat from a bowl of chips at a party, washing clothes three times in between wears). I assured her that taking the steps on her ladder would not make her sick, and I modeled these steps for her. In one session, I literally took some chips and put them on the floor, then picked them up and ate them. She looked disgusted with me as I did this, but I told her I was doing something extreme to show her that nothing bad would happen. I reassured her the next week that I did not get sick from eating the chips, and in fact, they tasted just as good as if I'd eaten them from the bag. I also assured her that while I do not make it a habit of eating off of the floor, I'm not afraid of doing it.

Facing one's fear is at the core of cognitive-behavioral treatment for anxiety disorders. Up until now, your child has likely been accommodating her anxiety, living her life avoiding those situations that cause her to feel nervous, uncomfortable, and scared. As her parent, you have no doubt joined her in living this way. By forming a "team" and developing "team goals," you are helping your child begin to take back control in her life and to overcome her anxiety and fears. The next chapter will focus on learning how to relax and calm the body.

Chapter 2 EXERCISE

Tips for Parents

1. Because forming the hierarchy involves listing many or all of your child's fear situations, he may feel a little overwhelmed (or anxious) about the prospect of having to complete the situations on his ladder. This is why it is crucial for you to remind your child of two things:
 - a. Your child will not have to face his fears just yet; first, he will learn many tools and strategies to manage the task of facing fears.
 - b. Your child will not be forced to face his fears. Rather, your child will go at his own pace. Although you will encourage your child, you will not force him to face his fears.
2. When developing the list of anxiety-provoking situations for your child, you may want to ask yourself the following questions: What things are hard for your child to do because he is anxious about doing them? What things do you avoid doing because they are upsetting/anxiety-provoking to your child? What are other children you know capable of doing that your child is not (e.g., riding a bike, going on a play date)? You also may want to ask extended family members or your closest friends what they observe to be challenging for your child to do because of his anxiety and include these situations in the ladder.
3. Remember to be very encouraging with your child as the two of you complete the ladder. You want to make it as positive and fun as possible, and ensure that it is not a shaming experience for him. Some children are sensitive about listing the many different things that are hard for them to do. If your child begins to feel this way, or expresses

embarrassment about his anxiety, then remind him of how common it is: that many children have anxiety. Tell him, “It’s the most common problem for kids, and at least 1 out of every 8 children have problems with anxiety” and “She wrote this book for a reason—there are a lot of kids with anxiety out there.” It is essential that you do not allow his embarrassment to prevent you from doing the exercise; is it possible that your child may be magnifying the embarrassment as a way to avoid facing his fears. In this case, label it as resistance and talk with your child (in a calm, nonblaming tone) about his concerns about treating the anxiety. Also, tell him how proud you are of him; provide positive reinforcement like praise and reward (“Let’s do this and then watch your favorite movie”). If needed, you can bring up the importance of being proactive and discuss living by our values, as discussed in Chapter 12.

4. As recommended below, I always leave a few spaces between some of the steps just in case you and your child decide to add some more situations (this often occurs once you have begun the exposure process).
5. When doing the exposures on their ladder, children will find it helpful if you can model for them first. So, if your child has social anxiety and she worries about sending food back in a restaurant or spilling something in public, show her it’s not so bad by first doing it yourself. This also will help her feel more confident about being able to do the exposures.
6. Finally, it is ideal if you can make the ladder as specific as possible, including the duration of the exposure, starting out small and gradually making it longer. For example, Thelma started out with her mom in the kitchen while she was in the living room alone for 5 minutes and gradually made it up to 30 minutes. It’s also best to use positive lan-

guage like “stand near a bush” instead of “don’t run away from the bush.”

Making Your Team and Team Goals

Who Is on Your Team? Write in the names of the members of your team in the blanks below. You do not have to fill in all of the blanks. Your team will be at least three people: You (the captain), whoever is reading the parent book (usually Mom or Dad), and me (Dr. Zucker). Other people you can include on your team are your grandparents, sister or brother, babysitter or nanny, pets, and your therapist if you have one. Your team members all will help you to face your fears in different ways. For example, Thelma’s dog, Sniffy, was on her team and Sniffy helped her face her fears by being with her in the beginning when she was nervous about her mom leaving her alone in the living room. Sniffy also gave her extra licks when she was happy about doing such a great job in facing her fears.

Your Team:

1. Team Captain: _____
(your name here)
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

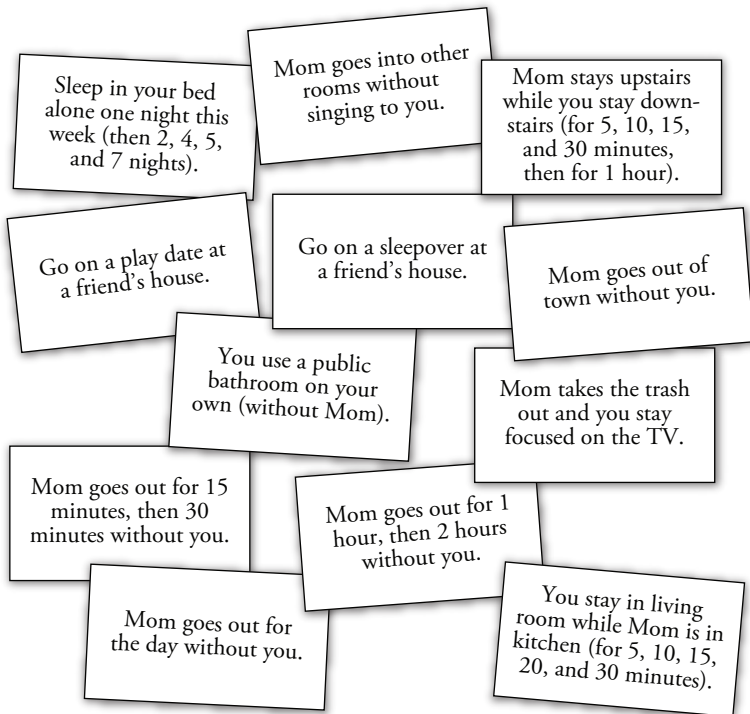
Team Goals: Making Your Ladder

You will need the following materials to make your ladder:

- ▶ Blank note cards
- ▶ Poster board (white or another light color)
- ▶ Markers
- ▶ Pen or pencil
- ▶ Stickers (stars, happy faces, whatever you want)

To Make Your Ladder:

1. Using note cards and a pen or pencil, write down all of the different things that are hard for you to do or that you avoid doing because of anxiety and worry. Your parent will help you make this list. Write each of these things on a different note card (sometimes kids and their parents choose to write it down on a piece of paper before they write it on the note cards; either way works, just as long as each thing is written on a note card).
2. Use the floor or a table and spread out all of the note cards. Then look carefully at each of the note cards and put them in order from easiest to hardest (your parent will help). The easiest ones will be on the bottom and the hardest ones will be up at the top. Here is what Thelma's note cards looked like before she made them into a ladder:



3. Now count your note cards. How many do you have?

4. Come up with a title for your ladder. Write the name here:

Now, write the title at the top of the poster board.

5. Use the poster board and markers to draw a great big ladder with steps, under where you wrote the title. The number of steps you draw should be the same as the number of note cards you have. Leave a little space here and there in between some of the steps, just in case you decide to add more things later on.
6. Write the steps, from easiest to hardest, on the ladder using the markers.

The stickers will be used once you start doing the steps. We won't begin doing this just yet; first you need to learn some tools (or ways) to deal with your anxious feelings and worries. You will first learn how to help the **body** part of anxiety. In the next chapter, you will learn about relaxation and deep breathing.

“Dr. Zucker’s *Anxiety-Free Kids* is the kind of practical help that parents of anxious children badly need. The book is unique in addressing the family and child together—strongly recommended.”

—Judith Rapoport, M.D.
Author of *The Boy Who Couldn’t Stop Washing* and Chief of the Child
Psychiatry Branch, National Institute of Mental Health

“Dr. Zucker skillfully and compassionately teaches parents and children how to reduce childhood fears and anxieties. The unique companion books unite parents and children to work as a team and lead them to win the battle over these distressing and challenging problems. *Anxiety-Free Kids* will be a great help to families and an important aid for all of us who work with anxious youth.”

—Golda Ginsberg, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Johns Hopkins University School of
Medicine, Division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry

Anxiety-Free Kids (2nd ed.) offers parents strategies that help children become happy and worry-free, methods that relieve a child’s excessive anxieties and phobias, and tools for fostering interaction and family-oriented solutions. Using a unique companion approach that offers two books in one—a practical, reader-friendly book for parents and a fun workbook for kids—this solutions-oriented guide utilizes the cognitive-behavioral approach to therapy and integrates the parent in the child’s self-help process.

Research has shown that if left untreated, children with anxiety disorders are at higher risk to perform poorly in school, to have less-developed social skills, and to be more vulnerable to substance abuse. Covering the six most commonly occurring anxiety disorders—generalized anxiety, separation anxiety, specific phobias, social phobias, panic disorder, and obsessive-compulsive disorder—this book gives kids and parents successful strategies for achieving relaxation, conquering worries, challenging faulty thinking patterns, developing positive self-talk, and facing one’s fears.



Bonnie Zucker, Psy.D., is a licensed psychologist in private practice in Rockville, MD. Using a cognitive-behavioral (CBT) approach, she has helped hundreds of children become anxiety-free. A respected psychologist in the treatment of anxiety, Dr. Zucker also is active in training mental health professionals on the treatment of anxiety disorders.

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