




The Gradual Exposure Technique

When our kids avoid things they feel scared of, or overwhelmed by, the fear and discomfort they are experiencing can keep growing. They can become more and more anxious and scared which can create further avoidance. Left unchecked, the fear and discomfort can end up controlling our kids. This can also happen in adults.

What?	Why?	
Feelings of fear	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not liking change • Finding going to busy environments overwhelming • Not liking certain food/clothes/textures/sounds • Not liking social situations • Fear of failure 	
What?	How?	
Confronting fear	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Just making kids face up to or confront things that are frightening/overwhelming is not going to work. It will be likely to result in a huge meltdown, which in turn would be likely to add to the fear/avoidance. • Instead, what we need to do is expose our kids to the things they don't like in very small steps that are a 'stretch' but are achievable. • As they get used to and comfortable with each step, we keep increasing their capacity until they are able to cope. 	
What?	How?	
Where to start?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For example, if your child doesn't like having their hair cut, rather than taking them to the hairdresser and trying to get them into the chair for a haircut we would work step-by-step: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Working towards them getting their hair be touched by a parent/carer 2. Having their hair brushed by a parent/carer. 3. A parent/carer pretending to snip their hair. 4. Actually cutting a little of their hair 5. Visiting the outside of hairdresser's shop 6. Going inside the hairdressers to watch 7. Sitting on the hairdresser's chair 8. Sitting on the hairdresser's chair while a parent brushes their hair 9. Hairdresser touching their hair. 10. Hairdresser brushing their hair. 11. Hairdresser pretending to cut their hair. 12. Hairdresser making a tiny snip. 13. Increasing the snips until a haircut occurs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repeat the process until the child can have haircuts with different hairdressers in different (generalising the skills) 	

Tips

- Choose a time when everyone is calm and not rushed (when someone is drowning it is not the right time to teach them to swim)
- Getting the 'stretch' right is the tricky bit, it needs to push the child just a tiny bit out of their comfort zone but not so much as to cause a major meltdown, eg. rather than starting with getting our kids to do a full supermarket shop, we might start with a trip to a local tiny shop, not to buy anything but just for a visit.
- Sometimes we just need to see how it goes and modify our plan if need be, eg. we think they are ready to 'stretch' to sitting on the hairdressers chair but things are not going so well so we go back to the step before and just visit the shop.
- Pairing a non-preferred activity with a preferred one often works well, eg. if being outside is your child's happy place, then introducing new food when they are outside is going to work better than when they are inside.
- Using special interests can work really well, eg. serving food on a Thomas the Tank Engine plate might help a child tolerate a new food if they love Thomas.
- Minimising sensory sensitivities can be good, eg. if kids don't like loud noises, give them ear buds or headphones to wear when going to a supermarket.