Exposure Therapy

**Objective**
Exposure Therapy, also known as systematic desensitization or contact desensitization, exposes an individual to something they are afraid of and gradually moves the person closer to that item, situation, or activity.

This treatment has been effective with a wide range of phobias such as fear of needles, showers, and animatronics objects. Exposure therapy can be used with other behavior techniques such as differential reinforcement, video modeling, and/or extinction.

**Candidates for this Program**
Students who exhibit phobias and engage in escape/avoidance behaviors related to these phobias.

**Procedure**
1. **Do a preference assessment** to determine reinforcing items. Food and activities can be used as reinforcers.
2. **Choose targets.** Find baseline to determine how close the child can get to the item or situation before they show escape behaviors such as running away, yelling, etc. This will give you a starting distance. Next, create a sequence of steps toward the final goal. For example, if a child is only able to get within ten feet of a dog, the next target distance might be nine feet away, then seven feet, and so on until the child is able to pet the dog.
3. **Reinforce** the child when they are within the target distance or place preferred items at each distance. How much reinforcement the child receives will depend on your learner and your procedure. For example, one way is to give the child uninterrupted access to preferred items/activities as long as they remain within target distance. For other children, they might receive a tangible, preferred item, and/or praise with each step closer to the item.
4. If the child walks out of the room or asks to leave, these requests can be honored. However, they should no longer have access to the preferred items. Once they return to the target distance, immediately give them the items.

**Things to Remember**
- The goal is to make the stimuli lose its fear provoking response, not to teach children to tolerate painful or distressing situations. If the child displays avoidance or distress and wants to escape from the situation, you might want to allow that. Or go back to a step that was easier for the child.
- Use behavior specific praise for the behavior that you want to see: “Good job being calm” or “Wow, you are brave.” Pair these words with tangible items if necessary.
- Always reinforce better approximations of the step even if they fell short of the target distance.
- Predetermined target steps can change and will depend on your learner. For some, the steps might need to be very small and require more time at each distance. Others might be able to take bigger steps.
- For some children, it might be necessary to deconstruct the feared item or situation. Then, slowly fade in parts of it in isolation. For example, the learner might need to start with a picture of a dog. Next, they might look at a video of a moving dog, and so on before being faced with a dog.

**References**


