Facing Your Fears Program for Youth with ASD and Anxiety: Adaptations to Improve Treatment Access

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Acknowledgements

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School of Medicine
JFK Partners/Developmental Pediatrics

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Autism Speaks and Organization for Autism Research
Objectives

- Introduction to anxiety in youth with ASD
- Review Facing Your Fears (FYF) clinic-based intervention program
- Adaptations to improve access –
  - School-based
  - Telehealth
Anxiety and Anxiety Disorders

![Graph showing the relationship between arousal and performance, with optimal performance at moderate arousal, and impaired performance at high or low arousal.]

- Optimal arousal: Optimal performance
- Impaired performance because of strong anxiety
- Increasing attention and interest

![Diagram showing the progression from fear to anxiety to worry, leading to a disorder, with excessive, persistent, interfering feelings.]

- Fear
- Anxiety
- Worry

(Manassis, 1996)
Anxiety vulnerabilities for people with ASD

**Anxiety Disorders are Common**
- 13-20% prevalence in general population \(\text{Walkup et al. 2008}\)
- 40% of youth with ASD met criteria for anxiety disorder \(\text{vanSteensel et al. 2011}\)

**Vulnerabilities**
- Shared biological etiologies with psychiatric illness
- Family history of anxiety disorders
- Diminished social understanding
- Bad social experiences (discrimination, victimization)
- Difficulties with executive functioning

\(\text{Lainhart, 1999; Mazefsky & Herrington, 2014}\)
Facing Your Fears (FYF)
Children’s Hospital Colorado

• Children’s Hospital Colorado, Developmental Pediatrics/JFK Partners
Treatment of Choice
Cognitive Behavioral Strategies for Anxiety

Core Components

- Psychoeducation
- Somatic Management
- Cognitive Restructuring
- Problem Solving
- Graded Exposure
- Relapse Prevention

What you think
“The spider will bite me and kill me!”

What you do
Scream, cry, avoid going outside

What you feel
Terrified, heart racing
FYF clinic program: Curriculum overview

**Weeks 1-6**

- Psychoeducation
- Increasing awareness of physiological and cognitive symptoms of anxiety
- Positive self-statements
- Introduction to relaxation skills and other coping strategies

**Weeks 7-14**

- Choosing a target and developing individual hierarchies
- Exposure/Facing Fears a little at a time
- Tracking practices and making movies
Modifications for Youth with ASD

A group of people standing around a table.

Michael worries and gets upset about different things. He spends a lot of his time at school worrying or being upset.

- A little
- Some
- A lot!!
Change in thinking

I’m a kid who can’t

I’m a kid who can...
FYF clinic program: Outcome research

- Reductions in parent reported anxiety following participation in FYF treatment (Reaven et al., 2009; Reaven et al., 2012)

- Excellent fidelity across studies (Reaven et al., 2012; Reaven et al., 2018)

- Parents and children report liking the treatment and finding it beneficial (Reaven et al., 2009; Reaven et al., 2012; Walsh et al., 2018)

- Significant improvement at 1 year follow up (Hepburn et al. in prep)

![Graph showing mean scared total score over time](image)
FYF clinic program: Access limitations

Limited number of groups offered per year

Location, location, location

Managing schedules/timing

Insurance coverage

Access for diverse and underserved families
FYF school-based project (FYF-SB): Goals

**Improve Access**
- Develop a sustainable school-based version of FYF through collaboration with key stakeholders
- Improve access to MH services, particularly for kids from underserved and diverse communities
- Broaden the provider base/interdisciplinary providers to administer a mental health curriculum

**Review Effectiveness**
- Examine effectiveness of the school-based program via a train the trainer model
What are kids with ASD worried about in school?

**Social Anxiety**
- Worry about what others think
- Fear of social rejection
- Fear of being teased/bullied
- Fear of unwanted social attention

**Making mistakes/Perfectionism**
- Worried about poor school performance
- Worried about being on time
- Worried about losing

**Change**
- Worrying that there will be a substitute
- Worrying about a new school year
- Fear of going someplace new
- Fear of trying a new activity

**Loud Noises**
- Fear that there will be a fire alarm
- Fear of the cafeteria
- Fear of assemblies
What does anxiety look like in school?

Parents say:
• Refuses to do things
• Won’t go to school
• Clingy
• “Goes nonverbal”
• “Flies under the radar”
• Gets “stuck in a loop”
• Will get “tough” and say threatening things

School providers say:
• Attendance issues and tardies
• Hiding under desks, leaving class
• Perfectionism
• Disruptions in class
• Instigating peer conflict
• Lack of confidence

Thank you for Cherry Creek, DPS, and Littleton Focus Groups 2017-18
FYF-SB program overview

**Session 1 & 2**
Welcome & Introduction
- Getting to know you/ice breaker
- Learning about emotions
- Everybody worries and gets upset sometimes
- How I react/feel when I worry

**Session 3 - 4**
Understanding My Worry/Upset and Calming My Body
- Time Spent Worrying/Upset
- Externalizing worries: Worry bugs
- False Alarms; Stress-o-meters
- Measuring worry/upset; Deep Breathing

**Sessions 5 - 6**
Managing the Mind; Calming the Body
- Identifying relaxing activities
- Active Minds and Helpful Thoughts
- Putting it Altogether
- Plan to Get to Green

**Sessions 8 - 12**
Practice Facing Fears
- Introduction to Exposure: Facing Fears
- Creating exposure hierarchies/steps to success
- Optional: Movie Making
- Review & Graduation

**Two Parent Sessions**

**Session 1:** Overview of FYF-SB; introduce tools/strategies

**Session 2:** Introduction to Graded Exposure; Wrap-up and review student progress
School Providers
77 school providers (2019-2020)

- OT (3.9%)
- Other Mental Health/Social Workers (10.3%)
- Speech and Language Pathologists (23.4%)
- Special Education Teachers (31.5%)
- Psychologists (29.9%)
Student Participants (2019-2020; N= 81)

- 2nd-8th grade students
- ASD or social communication difficulties similar to ASD
- Interfering anxiety symptoms
- IQ above 70 + phrase speech
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FYF-SB: Implementation Outcomes

• Improved CBT Knowledge (N=61): $t(60)=-6.29, p<.001$
• Treatment Completion and Fidelity (Overall)
  • Thirteen fall schools delivered FYF-SB
  • # of sessions completed: 6-12 (M=10)
  • 60% of sessions were coded for fidelity
  • Fidelity (absence/presence of core components): Range: 76-98% (M=86.15%)
FYF-SB: Initial Anxiety Outcomes

**Parent Report**
- **Significantly Improved Symptoms**
  - Total score
  - Panic
  - Separation
  - Social anxiety
- **No Change in Symptoms**
  - School
  - General Anxiety Disorder (GAD)

**Child Report**
- **Significantly Improved Symptoms**
  - Separation
  - Social anxiety
- **No Change in Symptoms**
  - Panic
  - School
  - GAD
Just when you think things are going ok...
Advantages to Telehealth

- Families can receive evidence-based interventions
- Fewer providers may be needed to run groups (minimum of 2 recommended)
- Reduce barriers of transportation, time away from work, child-care, etc.
- Some youth and families might prefer this approach to in-person
- Ability to reach rural communities
Initial Telehealth Trial

- **Telehealth** (Hepburn et al. 2016) (N=33)
  - Excellent fidelity 92.1%
  - Satisfaction
    - parent mean = 92.9%
    - youth mean = 86.4%
  - Significant reductions in parent report of youth anxiety
  - Improved parent sense of competence
Telehealth clinic program

- Shorter sessions
- 30-minute child component
- Creativity around participation and exposures
- “Kid of the week”
- Greater reliance on family follow-through for exposures
- Fewer in-session activities
- Ideal candidates:
  - Fears compatible with telehealth, adequate self-regulation

Questions?

FYF clinic program

FYF school based program

Telehealth