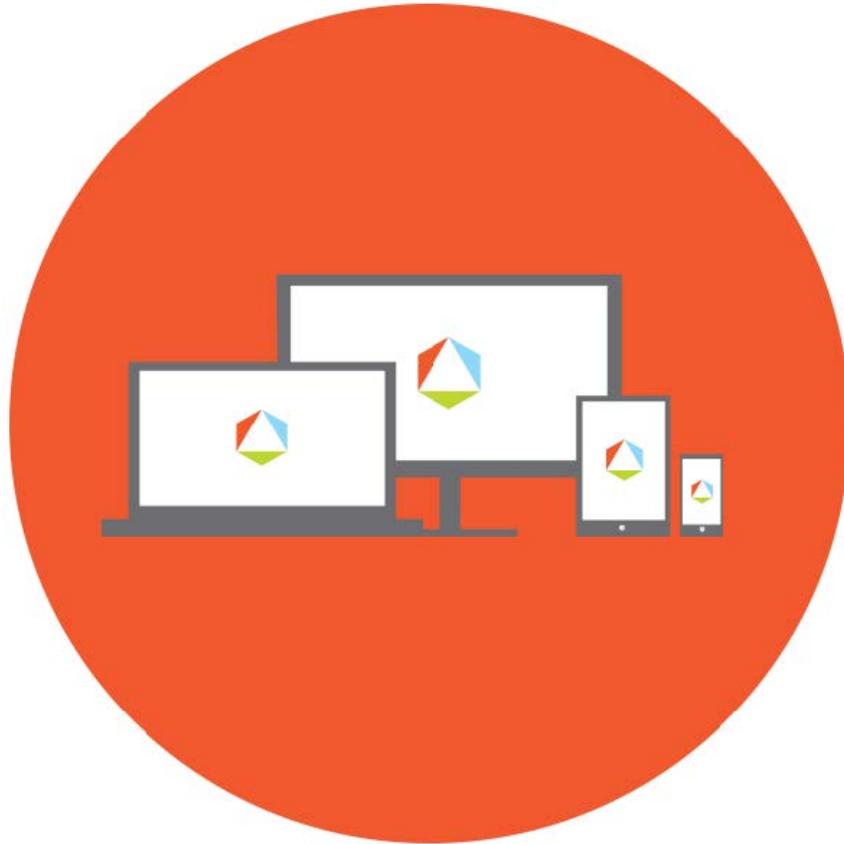




**FIRSTPATH**  
AUTISM



Lesson Guide

# 59. Desensitization and Coping skills

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# Desensitization and Coping Skills

## Overview

<p>Teaches:</p>	<p>This lesson helps teach/assist the child to be desensitized, or “less sensitive” to certain aversive stimuli. Increases coping skills.</p> <p>This lesson helps the child to slowly and systematically increase his/her appropriate behavior in the presence of specific stimuli that have a history of leading to maladaptive behavior (likely as a result of the child's stress/anxiety/fear in response to that stimulus). Examples are highly personal to each child, but may include certain sounds, tastes, sights, smells, or tactile sensations, as well as the presence of non-preferred objects or persons, or entry into non-preferred environments.</p>
<p>Before beginning:</p>	<p>The child's safety should be closely considered, and careful planning should occur to prevent any foreseeable danger when the lesson is introduced. For example, if the child has a history of suddenly running away when he sees a dog, then the teacher should be careful not to introduce this lesson in a large open area or near a road.</p> <p><u>A strong rapport and trust relationship is necessary, and should already be developed between the teacher and student, before attempting this lesson.</u></p> <p>Student should have demonstrated mastery of basic “If/Then” directives, so that he or she is able to understand and follow instructions.</p>
<p>Why it's important:</p>	<p>Individuals with autism can be especially sensitive to certain sensory stimuli, which can severely limit their ability to interact in the world around them. Specific sounds, sights, people, physical sensations, environments, etc. can be difficult to appropriately process. When this occurs, the child typically exhibits some form of maladaptive behavior to try to cope with the situation.</p> <p>Desensitization toward non-preferred stimulus can assist a child in reducing stress and subsequent maladaptive behaviors, and allow him or her to engage in an increasing number of age appropriate, normative activities and environments.</p>
<p>Materials needed:</p>	<p>**Pre-planning is <b>critical</b> in this lesson, to ensure that the</p>

	<p>child's exposure to the non-preferred stimulus is <i>limited and controlled</i>. In addition, a contingency plan for anticipated maladaptive behavior should be in place.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A <b>controlled version</b> of the non-preferred stimulus for which you are targeting desensitization.</li> <li>• A timer.</li> <li>• If needed, a visual reminder of the behavior expected, or of the reinforcer to be earned after appropriately tolerating the non-preferred stimulus.</li> <li>• In some situations, a second teacher/adult will be extremely helpful in cuing the non-preferred stimulus, while the first teacher assists the child in appropriate behavior.</li> <li>• Other materials specific to the targeted situation, if needed.</li> </ul>
<p>Generalization activities:</p>	<p>After the child has mastered the ability to cope with the non-preferred stimulus in a highly structured setting, stimuli should be slowly and systematically generalized to the context in which the non-preferred stimulus would <i>naturally</i> occur. This would include natural environment, people, duration of time, etc.</p>

## Steps

### Prepare

1. Teacher should have a clear plan in advance of who, where, and for how long the child will be required to tolerate the non-preferred stimulus.
2. Plan to "begin small" to help increase chances for success. Do not attempt to begin at the level at which you would ultimately like to see the child functioning. Initial success is very important in this lesson.
3. If a second teacher is involved, make sure clear planning and communication has occurred, specifying what and for how long the aversive stimulus will occur.
4. If applicable, carefully consider what appropriate behavior the child will be directed to, and its impact long-term and under generalization across environments.
5. Ensure that a reinforcer assessment has recently been completed, and that the child is ready to "earn and learn". **A powerful reinforcer that has the potential to overcome the child's fear/aversion is especially important for this lesson.**
6. Have data collection (via tablet or paper/pencil) ready.



## Teach

1. The teacher should briefly prepare the child for what to expect, via vocal (and visual, if needed) explanation. Explanation should tell the child that he will experience a "little bit" of the stimulus and instruct him in what he is expected to do. Try to avoid discussion of the maladaptive behavior he typically exhibits. Example: "We will hear a little bit of the vacuum. We are going to quietly hug your bear until it stops." (Refrain from mentioning the high-pitched screaming the child typically exhibits.)
2. Introduce small amount/duration of non-preferred stimulus.
3. Prompt appropriate coping behavior.
4. Provide feedback on how the child responded:
  - **Appropriate behavioral response:** enthusiastic praise and/or give the child his chosen reward.
  - **Maladaptive behavior:** corrective feedback, model or prompt of correct response, prompt child to engage in appropriate behaviors before stimulus is removed.
5. Record data.
6. Begin again at step 1.

## Examples

Correct response	Incorrect response
<p><b>Teacher:</b> "We will hear a little bit of the vacuum. We are going to quietly hug your bear until it stops." (cues vacuum, turns on for 3 seconds, then turns off)</p> <p><b>Child:</b> Hugs bear quietly, without screaming.</p> <p><b>Teacher:</b> "That was awesome! You hugged your bear until the vacuum stopped!" (and delivers reinforcer)</p>	<p><b>Teacher:</b> "We will hear a little bit of the vacuum. We are going to quietly hug your bear until it stops." (cues vacuum, turns on for 3 seconds, then turns off)</p> <p><b>Child:</b> Begins to engage in high-pitched screaming.</p> <p><b>Teacher:</b> "Uh-oh! Let's hug bear!" prompts child to hug bear and as soon as he does, turns off vacuum. "That was better. You hugged bear until the vacuum stopped." (<b>Teacher</b> does not deliver reinforcer at this time; rather, re-starts teaching cycle)</p>

\*\*It is important in error correction for this lesson that the child does not escape the aversive stimulus as a result of inappropriate behavior, or the inappropriate behavior will be strengthened. For example, the vacuum should not turn off while the child is screaming. It should turn off after the child has hugged the bear (and, if possible, stopped the screaming), so that those coping behaviors are the ones made stronger.

## Typical Order of Learning Targets:

**This lesson is highly individual to each child, and progression should be carefully planned prior to introducing the lesson. As it is impossible to predict every possible situation and progression track, general guidelines are offered below, as well as an example of how they might be utilized.**

1. Targets should be chosen specifically to address particular areas of difficulty for the child, and should be addressed one at a time. If possible, less aversive targets should be introduced before more highly stressful targets.
2. Plan each step of the gradual and systematic increase of the target.
  - Introduction of aversive stimulus in structured setting, for pre-determined intensity/duration.
  - Incrementally increase exposure to aversive stimulus (intensity/duration) in structured settings.
  - Generalization across natural environments in which stimulus typically occurs.

### Example:

#### AVERSIVE STIMULUS: Sound of vacuum cleaner

Child refrains from maladaptive behavior while:

1. Pre-recorded sound of a vacuum is played quietly (on CD player/phone) for 5 seconds
2. Pre-recorded sound of a vacuum is played quietly (on CD player/phone) for 15 sec.
3. Pre-recorded sound of a vacuum is played quietly (on CD player/phone) for 30 sec.
4. Pre-recorded sound of a vacuum is played quietly (on CD player/phone) for 1 minute
5. Vacuum is turned on in another room for 10 seconds
6. Vacuum is turned on in another room for 30 seconds
7. Vacuum is turned on in another room for 1 minute
8. Vacuum is turned on in the same room for 10 seconds
9. Vacuum is turned on in the same room for 30 seconds
10. Vacuum is turned on in the same room for 1 minute (\*\*if appropriate, the child can be taught to calmly exit to another room while the vacuum is running)
11. Operating the vacuum himself for 30 seconds
12. Operating the vacuum himself for 1 minute
13. Generalization to Grandma's house
14. Generalization to a friend's home.