

Facing Your Fears: Group Therapy for Managing Anxiety in Children with High-Functioning ASD  
Autism Speaks Intervention Training Portfolio RFI

**1) Nature of the intervention**

Facing Your Fears (FYF) is a family-focused group intervention for children and adolescents with high-functioning autism and anxiety. This cognitive-behavioral (CBT) program consists of 14 weekly sessions, each lasting 1½ hours, aimed at managing anxiety symptoms in youth ages 7-14. The 14 weeks are divided into two treatment blocks: the first seven sessions provide an introduction to anxiety symptoms and basic CBT strategies, while the last seven sessions focus on the implementation and generalization of specific tools for regulating anxiety. A facilitator manual offers session-by-session goals and guidance for group leaders (see “Manual” section below).

FYF draws upon a number of empirically supported CBT approaches for treating anxiety in the general pediatric population such as Coping Cat (Kendall & Hedtke, 2006). FYF retains the core components of standard CBT programs, including graded exposure, deep breathing, emotion regulation strategies, and positive cognitive coping, but makes appropriate adaptations for youth with high-functioning ASD (Reaven, Blakeley-Smith, Nichols, & Hepburn, 2011). These adaptations take into account the social, emotional, and communicative challenges associated with ASD and are designed to enhance participation and engagement. They include:

- careful pacing of each session
- a token reinforcement program for positive in-group behavior
- provision of visual structure and predictability of routine
- use of worksheets and multiple choice lists
- written examples of core concepts
- hands-on activities
- an emphasis on creative outlets for expression
- a focus on strengths and special interests
- multiple opportunities for repetition and practice
- video modeling and a specific video activity (e.g., creating movies)
- a detailed parent curriculum

Parents play a central role in the FYF intervention, participating in dyad- and group-based activities with their children and providing structure and support for facing fears at home. Parents are taught to reward their children’s courageous behavior, to help their children recognize and regulate anxiety symptoms, to improve their awareness and management of their own anxiety symptoms, and to model effective problem-solving and self-regulating strategies to deal with anxiety.

## 2) Training details

### a. Trainers:

Lead trainers are Judy Reaven, Ph.D. and Audrey Blakeley-Smith, Ph.D. , co-developers of FYF.

**Judy Reaven, Ph.D.** is an Associate Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Colorado School of Medicine and the Director of the Autism and Developmental Disabilities Clinic of JFK Partners. Dr. Reaven is a licensed clinical psychologist who has worked with individuals with ASD and other developmental disabilities for nearly 25 years. Her clinical work has focused on the diagnosis and treatment of children and adolescents with ASD, emphasizing the application of CBT for the co-occurring mental health conditions in individuals with ASD – particularly anxiety symptoms. From her clinical work, she developed the original FYF intervention package (Reaven et al. 2011), and has been the Principal Investigator on four separate clinical research projects examining the initial efficacy of the intervention for children and adolescents with ASD and anxiety. Ten years of continuous funding has been received by The Organization for Autism Research (OAR), Cure Autism Now (CAN), Autism Speaks, and NIH. She has been the first author on eight of the UC research group’s publications on CBT for children with ASD and anxiety. Dr. Reaven conducts the trainings and provides ongoing consultation for FYF facilitators.

**Audrey Blakeley-Smith, Ph.D.** is an Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Colorado School of Medicine. Dr. Blakeley-Smith is a licensed clinical psychologist who has worked with individuals with ASD for over 10 years. She has worked extensively with Dr. Reaven on the development and delivery of the FYF intervention. She is co-author on the majority of studies published by UC using CBT for the reduction of anxiety symptoms in children with ASD. Dr. Blakeley-Smith is also co-author of the FYF intervention. She works closely with Dr. Reaven to provide training and consultation for FYF facilitators.

Two other program developers, **Shana Nichols, Ph.D., and Susan Hepburn, Ph.D.,** as well as experienced clinicians who worked directly with the FYF intervention program may also conduct trainings.

### b. Trainees:

There are two levels of trainings offered: (1) general training on the Facing Your Fear program, open to parents and professionals, and (2) specialized training for professionals (e.g., psychologists, social workers, BCBA, speech/pathologists, occupational and physical therapists, educators, etc.) who intend to implement the FYF program. Phone-based consultation in addition to video review of group sessions are offered by the trainers, to provide ongoing guidance and support for new facilitators and to ensure adherence to treatment protocol.

### c. Frequency and location of training:

Trainings are offered on an as-needed basis at the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus School of Medicine and at other locations upon request. Please contact **Judy Reaven** at the address below to schedule a training session for your organization.

d. **Train the trainer:**

Our team is committed to maximizing the treatment’s accessibility to youth with autism and anxiety and their families. We are currently conducting an NIH-funded study of FYF treatment dissemination to multiple sites across the country and in Canada (see “Evidence base for the intervention” section). The project involves training mental health professionals from clinics outside the University of Colorado, monitoring treatment fidelity, soliciting clinician feedback and suggestions, and evaluating youth anxiety treatment outcome. Once participant results and facilitator feedback have been obtained from this research, a “train-the-trainer” model may be considered as a way to further enhance the transportability of FYF.

e. **Manual:**

The FYF intervention is supported by a set of manuals for facilitators, parents, and children (Reaven et al., 2011). The Facilitator’s Manual guides group leaders through each FYF session with step-by-step instructions, example schedules, materials lists, and tips for making sessions run smoothly. The Parent Workbook and Child Workbook include a variety of worksheets, activities, and videos to help children and their families face fears together. The *Facing Your Fears—Facilitator’s Set* includes all of these resources and is available for purchase online at <http://products.brookespublishing.com/Facing-Your-Fears-Facilitators-Set-P144.aspx>.

**3) Evidence base for the intervention**

JFK Partners has been developing a CBT research program for over 10 years, building a strong reputation in the greater Denver community for providing intervention programs to promote coping in youth with ASD. Over 100 families have participated in efficacy studies of the FYF intervention since the inception of the program in 2004. Our research in the development, efficacy, and dissemination of the FYF intervention is summarized below.

*Pilot Study (Reaven, Blakeley-Smith, Nichols, Dasari, Flanigan, & Hepburn, 2009)*

In the initial pilot study, 33 children between the ages of 7 and 13 and their parents enrolled in the 14-week intervention and were assigned to either the FYF group or the waitlist comparison group. In the FYF group, parents’ ratings of their children’s anxiety symptoms decreased significantly following treatment, while anxiety symptoms persisted in the waitlist comparison group. This research provided preliminary support for the efficacy and feasibility of the FYF intervention.

*Randomized Controlled Trial (Reaven, Blakeley-Smith, Culchane-Shelburne, & Hepburn, 2012)*

Building on these findings, a randomized controlled trial was conducted with 50 children ages 7-14 and their parents. An Independent Clinical Evaluator (ICE) interviewed parents before and after the intervention using the Anxiety Disorders Interview Schedule for Children—Parent Version (ADIS-P; Silverman & Albano, 1996). Results indicated significant differences between the FYF and treatment-as-usual (TAU) groups in Clinician Severity Ratings (CSR) of anxiety, diagnostic status, and clinician ratings of improvement. Overall, 50% of youth in the FYF condition demonstrated clinically meaningful improvements in anxiety symptoms, compared to just 8.7% of participants in the TAU condition. In addition, parent and child report indicated that post-intervention reductions in anxiety symptoms were maintained at 6 month follow-up.

*Facing Your Fears in Adolescence: Pilot Study (Reaven, Blakeley-Smith, Leuthe, Moody, & Hepburn, 2012)*

In light of FYF's success in mitigating anxiety in school-aged children, a second pilot study was initiated to assess the efficacy of a modified treatment for teens (Facing Your Fears in Adolescence; FYF-A). The modified program maintained the basic structure and core components of the original FYF intervention, but made appropriate adaptations for adolescents, including less time spent with parents and the integration of technology (i.e., using an iPod touch to track anxiety symptoms). Twenty-four adolescents aged 13-18 and their parents completed the FYF-A intervention. Significant reductions in anxiety severity and interference were observed following treatment, with low rates of anxiety maintained at 3 month follow-up. Furthermore, nearly 46% of teen participants met criteria for a clinically meaningful positive treatment response on their primary diagnosis following the intervention.

*Training Outpatient Clinicians to Deliver FYF (NIMH: 1R21MH089291-01; 4R33MH089291-03; Reaven: PI)*

In 2009, JFK Partners was awarded a 5-year grant from NIMH to train outpatient clinicians to fidelity on the FYF program for youth ages 7-14 with high-functioning ASD and clinical anxiety. The aim of this project was to train outpatient clinicians practicing outside of our lab setting, and to compare three methods of instruction for training group facilitators (manual only, workshop only, workshop plus bimonthly consultation).

In our initial efforts to train professionals outside of our group, psychologists/psychologists-in-training from the IWK Centre in Halifax, Nova Scotia (**on-site PI: Isabel Smith, Ph.D.**) conducted four treatment groups delivering the FYF intervention to 16 children ages 8-14 with high-functioning ASD and anxiety. Clinicians' adherence to protocol for all four groups exceeded 90% and child participants demonstrated significant reductions in anxiety symptoms following treatment (54% met criteria for a clinically meaningful improvement). Results from this pilot work were presented at the Association for Behavior and Cognitive Therapy in November 2012 and at the International Meeting for Autism Research (ABCT: [link](#); IMFAR: [link](#)). Additional sites (University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill; **onsite-PI: Laura Klinger, Ph.D.**; Cincinnati Children's Hospital; **on-site PI: Amie Duncan, Ph.D.**; University of Alabama – Birmingham; **on-site PI: Sarah O'Kelley, Ph.D.**; Kennedy Krieger Institute; **on-site PI's: Amy Keefer, Ph.D. and Rebecca Landa, Ph.D.**) are participating in the NIH study and have received specialized training in the FYF protocol. Results will be used to develop optimal training programs for future FYF facilitators in order to further the dissemination and evaluation of the FYF program.

In addition to training the sites that were part of the NIH study, our group has also trained professionals in a number of geographic locations (e.g., Vancouver and Toronto, Canada; Colorado Springs and Denver, CO). The audiences have included mental health professionals working in outpatient clinics and school settings, as well as non-mental health professionals (e.g., speech/language pathologists, occupational and physical therapists, special educators, etc.).

In sum, this body of research provides encouraging support for the potential efficacy and initial effectiveness of the FYF intervention in reducing anxiety symptoms in youth with high-functioning ASD. We are currently gathering long-term follow-up data from children and parents who have participated in the FYF program and investigating family outcomes and collateral effects of the treatment, to further our understanding of the intervention.

#### 4) Provisions for cultural adaptation

FYF has been used successfully with parents and children of diverse backgrounds. Facilitators are encouraged to consider the diversity of sociocultural contexts in which both anxiety and effective intervention can occur, and to adapt therapeutic techniques and activities when necessary. While materials are currently available only in English, group leaders may choose to employ translation/interpretation services available through their organization in order to promote access and inclusion of non-English-speaking families.

#### 5) Contact information

For additional information regarding FYF training opportunities and materials, please visit [www.ucdenver.edu/academics/colleges/medicalschool/programs/JFKPartners](http://www.ucdenver.edu/academics/colleges/medicalschool/programs/JFKPartners) or [www.facingfears.org](http://www.facingfears.org) or contact:

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