



# CBITS

## (Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools)

### Parent Education Information

The Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBITS) program is a school-based, group and individual intervention. It is designed to reduce symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and behavioral problems, and to improve functioning, grades and attendance, peer and parent support, and coping skills.

CBITS has been used with students from 5th grade through 12th grade who have witnessed or experienced traumatic life events such as community and school violence, accidents and injuries, physical abuse and domestic violence, and natural and man-made disasters.

CBITS uses cognitive-behavioral techniques (e.g., psychoeducation, relaxation, social problem solving, cognitive restructuring, and exposure).

For more information, go to [cbitsprogram.org](http://cbitsprogram.org)

If you have any questions, please contact the Parent Involvement and Community Outreach Center, and ask for a CBITS Staff Member (951)360-4175

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**Education About Common Reactions to Trauma**

This part of the session conveys information about general types of problems that children experience when they have been exposed to traumatic life events. The children will learn about these reactions but it is really important for parents to understand them too. If parents understand the many problems that can result from traumatic experiences, they might be more understanding and supportive of the children, and less frustrated or worried about them.

- o All of the problems listed below are common reactions to severe stress.
- o The group for the children is designed to help with these specific problems.
- o Parents may notice that they have some of these same problems because of stressful things they themselves have gone through.

**Common Reactions to Stress or Trauma:**

**Having nightmares or trouble sleeping.** When something really scary or upsetting happens, it takes a while to figure out exactly what happened and what it means. After severe stress or trauma, people tend to keep thinking about what happened in order to “digest” it, just like your stomach has to work to digest a big meal. This can take a long time. Nightmares are one way of digesting what happened to you. **Thinking about it all the time.** This is another way to digest what happened. Just like having nightmares, thinking about the trauma all the time is a problem because it makes you feel upset. It can be unpleasant.

**Wanting to NOT think or talk about it.** This is natural, since it is upsetting to think about a past stress or trauma, and it can make you feel all sorts of emotions. Avoiding it makes things easier, but only for a little while. It’s important to digest what happened sooner or later. So, while avoiding it sometimes makes sense, you have to set aside some time to digest it also. This group can be the time and place you set aside to digest what happened to you.

**Avoiding places, people, or things that make you think about it.** Just like not wanting to talk about or think about the trauma, avoiding situations that remind you of what happened can help you feel better right then. The problem with this, though, is that it keeps you from doing normal things that are an important part of your life. The goal of this group is to get you back to the point where you are able to do whatever you want to do, without worrying about whether it will remind you of what happened.

**Feeling scared for no reason.** Sometimes this happens because you remember what happened to you, or you are thinking about what happened. Other times it happens because your body is so tense all the time that you just start feeling scared. Either way, we can work on helping you feel calmer when it happens.

**Feeling “crazy” or out of control.** If all of these things are problems for you, you can start to feel really out of control or even crazy. Don’t worry, though; these problems don’t mean that you are going crazy. They are all normal reactions to stress or trauma, and there are ways to help you feel better.

**Not being able to remember parts of what happened.** This happens to a lot of people. The stressful event can be so awful that your memory doesn’t work the way it usually does. Sometimes it gets easier to remember later on, and sometimes it gets harder. This can be frustrating, but it is really normal.

**Having trouble concentrating at school or at home.** With all the nervousness you are feeling and all the time you are spending thinking about what happened, it can be hard to concentrate on school work or even on what your friends or family say to you.

**Being on guard to protect yourself; feeling like something bad is about to happen.** After something bad happens to you, it makes sense to be prepared for another bad thing to happen. The problem with this is that you can spend so much time waiting for the next bad thing to happen that you don’t have time or energy for other things in your life. Also, it is scary to think something bad is going to happen.

**Jumping when there is a loud noise.** This is one way that your body says it is prepared for action, in case something else happens. As you begin to feel calmer, this will go away.

**Feeling anger.** Some people feel angry about the stress or trauma that happened, or about the things that happened afterward. Other people just feel angry all the time, at everything and everybody. Both of these are normal and will get better as you begin to digest what happened to you.

**Feeling shame.** Sometimes people are ashamed about what happened to them or how they acted. Even though it’s hard to believe, this gets better the more that you talk about what happened. If you keep it a secret, it’s hard for the shame to go away.

**Feeling guilt.** People can feel guilty about what happened or about something they did or did not do. Sometimes you blame yourself for things that you couldn’t control. You may also feel guilty for upsetting your parents. Guilty feelings can make it hard to talk about what happened.

**Feeling sadness/grief/loss.** Sometimes stress events or traumas include losing someone close to you or losing something that is important to you. This makes you feel sad and down. We’ll help you talk about these feelings in the group.

**Feeling bad about yourself.** Sometimes, all this stress can make you feel really bad about yourself, like you’re a bad person or that no one likes you. This makes it harder to be friendly and to have fun with others.

**Having physical health problems and complaints.** Stress has an effect on your body as well. People sometimes get sick more often or notice pain and discomfort more often when they have been under stress.

### Explanation of CBITS

Figure 2



-When something stressful happens, how does that change what you think? What you do? What you feel?

-Stress or trauma causes all of these to change and each then impacts the others, making you feel worse.

-A possible example:

“Your children are in a car accident. That’s the stress or trauma. Afterwards, they feel shaky, nervous, upset. They think that riding in a car is really dangerous, and they don’t want to go in a car again. When you ask if they want to go shopping with you, they say no and stay home because they don’t want to be in the car.”

-The program is going to help with things like this:

Your children are all in this program because they had something really stressful happen to them. In this program, we are going to work on all three corners of the triangle. We are going to:

- Teach the children some exercises that will make them FEEL better and less nervous or upset.
- Teach them some ways to THINK about things that will also make them feel better.
- Teach the children some ways to DO things so that they are able to do everything you want them to be able to do, without feeling upset when they do them.

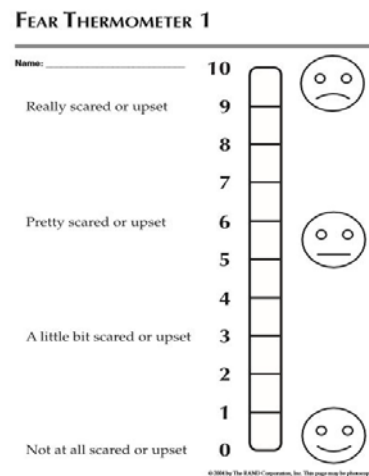
One very important part of this program is PRACTICE. Learning new skills in this program is like learning to ride a bicycle or to drive a car. At first, the skills feel uncomfortable, and it is hard to figure out how to do them. But if you practice the skills over and over again, eventually it becomes so easy and natural that you don’t even have to think about it—you can ride the bike without thinking about balancing the bike and steering it and putting on the brakes when you need them. We will be practicing the new skills in the group and also asking your children to practice certain things at home between groups. The more that you can support and encourage the children to practice, the faster they will learn to use these skills to handle stress.

### **Teaching Your Child to Measure Fear**

The Fear Thermometer:

Part of what we’ll be teaching your children is how to talk about how nervous or afraid they are. We will do this by teaching them to use a “Fear Thermometer.” Like a thermometer that measures temperature, the Fear Thermometer measures how scared or upset the children feel.

“10” on the Fear Thermometer is kept for those times when you are completely and utterly scared or upset.



### **How to Help Your Child Relax**

Stress makes our bodies tense, and feeling nervous or upset makes it even worse. But there are ways to relax your body that will make you feel calmer. We are going to be teaching your children one way to relax, and we want to teach it to you also. That way, when your children have trouble sleeping or are feeling very worried, you can use it to help them relax.

Try this exercise:

Lean back in your chair, close your eyes, and follow these instructions.

*Start by thinking of a place that makes you really comfortable, like your bed, or the bathtub, or the couch, or the beach. Imagine that you are lying down there or sitting comfortably. Take a breath in [wait three to four seconds] and out [wait three to four seconds], in . . . and out . . . in . . . and out . . . Try to keep breathing this way as we continue. And keep thinking about your most comfortable spot.*

*Now I'd like you to make a fist, and squeeze it really tight. Hold it. Now relax it completely; shake it out. Do it again— make a fist. Now relax it completely. Can you feel the difference between how it was when it was tight and now how it feels when it's relaxed? Let's do the same thing for the rest of your arm. Tighten up your whole arm, like you are making a muscle, and hold it. Now relax it completely. Do it again. Tighten, now relax. Now let's move to your shoulders. Bring your shoulders up to your ears and tighten them, hold it. Now relax. Do that again. Bring your shoulders way up near your ears, hold it, now relax them completely. Make sure your hands, arms, and shoulders are completely relaxed. Breathe in . . . and out . . . in . . . and out.*

*Let's work on your face now. Scrunch up your face as tight as you can, close your eyes tight, scrunch up your mouth, and hold it. Now relax. Try that again. Tighten up your whole face, and hold it. Now relax it. Keep breathing like we did before . . . in . . . and out . . . in . . . and out.*

*Next comes your body. Arch your back as much as you can, put your shoulders way back, Hold it. Now relax that. Next, lean forward onto your knees and curl your back the other way, and tighten up your stomach as much as you can. Hold it. Now relax it. Do that again, hold it, and relax it. Keep breathing in . . . and out . . . in . . . and out.*

*Let's work on your legs and feet. Straighten your legs up in the air in front of you, and bring your toes as close to your face as you can. Now hold it. Relax. Do that again, hold it, and now relax. Next, point your toes as far as you can away from your face, and again tighten up your leg muscles. Hold it. Now relax. Do that again, hold it, and relax. Breathe in . . . and out . . . in . . . and out.*

*Think about all the parts of your body, and relax any part that is tight now. Let all the tension go out of your body. Breathe in . . . and out . . . in . . . and out. Now begin to open your eyes, sit back up.*

**Teaching Children to Look at Their Thoughts**

When children are under stress, they can have really negative ideas about themselves, about the world in general, or about why the stress happened. For example, after children immigrate to the U.S., they might think things like:

‘My life will never be the same.’

‘I’ll never be happy again.’

‘I will never fit in here in the U.S.’

After children go through traumatic events, they often think that they are to blame in some way or that what happened is their fault. They also usually think bad things about themselves (‘I’m no good’) and think that the world is more dangerous than it really is (‘There is no place where I am safe’ or ‘I can’t trust anyone’).

These kinds of thoughts make children feel even worse. Negative thoughts are often not completely true. For instance, it’s probably not true that the children will never be happy again or that they can’t trust anyone. When negative thoughts aren’t true, they still make us upset unless we realize that they aren’t true.

We will be teaching the children to pay attention to the way they think about things. If they notice some negative thinking, we’ll teach them some questions to ask themselves to make sure that they aren’t thinking inaccurately.

Some of the questions your children will start to ask themselves are:

- Is there another way to look at this?
- Is there another reason why this would happen?
- What’s the worst thing that can happen?
- What’s the best thing that can happen?
- What is the most likely thing to happen?
- Is there anything I can do about this?
- What is the evidence that this thought is true?
- Has something like this happened to me before?
- Has this happened with other people?”

The questions might help people to realize that their thoughts are not accurate and that there are more accurate ways to look at the situations.

**EXAMPLES OF THOUGHTS**

Negative Thoughts	Hot Seat Thoughts
If I fall asleep, I’ll have nightmares.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I don’t have nightmares every night, so I might not have them tonight.</li> <li>• Nightmares aren’t real, they can’t hurt me.</li> <li>• I need to get some sleep for school tomorrow, even if it means I have nightmares.</li> </ul>
If I fall asleep, something bad will happen.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I’m safe in my house and my bed. My family is here to protect me.</li> <li>• If something bad happens, I’ll wake up and be able to deal with it then.</li> </ul>
Lying down in my bed makes me feel nervous.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I can practice my relaxation if I feel nervous.</li> <li>• I can remind myself that I am safe.</li> <li>• It’s OK to feel nervous for a little while; eventually I’ll fall asleep.</li> </ul>

## **Teaching Children to Face Their Fears**

One way that people deal with stress is to try to avoid it. You have probably all had the experience of NOT wanting to do something that will make you feel nervous or afraid. This usually works for a short time—we can sometimes avoid something that will be hard for us. But over time, it can interfere with your life. For instance, some of you may feel nervous or anxious when you try to speak English. So, you might try to avoid speaking English unless you really have to. But this interferes with learning English, so it makes it harder to speak English for a longer period of time. The same thing happens with children who go through stressful experiences. They avoid the things that make them uncomfortable. They begin to avoid more and more often. For instance, children who feel afraid of school will sometimes skip school, but that just makes it harder to go back to school again.

In the group, we will be teaching your children to face their fears. What do we mean by facing your fears? We mean trying to do something that you are afraid of over and over again until it becomes normal and easy.

## **FACING YOUR FEARS**

- 1) Choose something from the list that you are sure you can manage, with a rating of no more than 4 for your first try.
- 2) Figure out when and where you can try to do the thing you chose.
  - You need to do it over and over again, not just once or twice.
  - You need to be able to do it SAFELY:
    - Don't do anything that will put you in danger.
    - Don't do anything without telling someone first.
- 3) Tell a parent what you are going to do. Make sure your parent understands what you plan and can help you with it, if you need help.
- 4) When you do it, stick with it no matter how nervous you feel. Keep at it until you begin to feel a little bit less nervous or upset. You can use the relaxation technique if you need it. You might need to stick with it for a long time, up to an hour, before you start to feel better. If you don't feel better after an hour, make sure to try it again and again. Eventually, with enough practice, you'll start to feel more comfortable.
- 5) Fill out the Assignment worksheet and show how you felt on the Fear Thermometer before and after each time you did it. Also, tell what your highest level on the Fear Thermometer was. Talk to your group leader if you don't see any improvement.
- 6) If you feel very anxious, use one of the following skills to help yourself feel better:
  - Thought stopping.
  - Distraction.
  - Positive images.
  - Relaxation.

With the children, we will start by making a list of situations that make each of them feel anxious or upset and then rank the situations in terms of how much anxiety each situation causes (using the Fear Thermometer). We will be careful about a couple of things when we do this: 1. The situations on the list must be SAFE. We will not include situations that involve being exposed to violence in person, doing anything dangerous, or being in unsafe environments (e.g., out alone in a deserted area at night). 2. Some situations are designed to make people feel nervous or excited, and are hard to work on. These include watching scary movies, riding roller coasters, etc. We will not work on these kinds of situations either.

We will concentrate instead on the answers to the following questions:

Are there any things that you used to do regularly that you stopped doing after the stress or trauma you went through? Examples: going to places that remind you of what happened, doing things that you were doing when the stress or trauma happened.

- Have you started avoiding things like being alone in certain places, being in the dark, sleeping by yourself?
- Do you avoid talking to people about what happened? Is there anyone that you'd like to be able to talk to about it?
- Do you avoid reading things or watching certain TV programs that remind you about what happened?
- Do you avoid certain objects that make you nervous or upset because they were there when it happened?

Then children will rate each situation using the Fear Thermometer [on Pg.5], and they will participate in activities.

You can help by working with your children to do the assignments. Sometimes your children will need to do something with you first, before being able to do it alone. We also need you to help your children face their fears by facing your own. You might notice that you are nervous about doing certain things too, because of the kinds of stressors you have faced. By helping your children, you may find that you become more comfortable with doing these things.

### **Teaching Children to Digest What Happened to Them**

We are going to work with your children on the stresses or traumas that they have gone through.

Have you ever eaten too much all at once and felt really full and sick afterwards? And you wish you never ate that much? Your stomach feels sick because it's got too much in it at once. That food feels like its filling up your whole body. Your stomach has more than it can handle.

The way you think about the stressful event you went through can also feel like that—it's too much to digest at once, so it bothers you a lot. Just like with the meal, you need to "digest" it sooner or later though. Even though the stress probably seems really overwhelming when you think about it now, eventually, with enough work, you can make it smaller. We're going to help your children digest what happened.

By thinking about the stress or trauma where it is safe (with a counselor or in the group), a couple of things will happen:

1. Over time, if your children work on digesting the stresses or traumas, they will feel less upset each time they think about it. By the end of group sessions, your children will be able to think about what happened and feel OK.
2. Your children will learn that thinking about the stresses or traumas won't make them flip out or go crazy—that it's a bad memory and it can't hurt them anymore.
3. Your children will learn that they can take control of the way they feel and do something to make themselves feel better.



We will work on the traumas by asking your children to imagine them or to draw pictures of them or to talk about them in the group sessions.

**Teaching Children to Solve Everyday Problems**

Solving problems with other people takes practice.

Examples of the kinds of problems that children face:

- o Getting in arguments with friends.
- o Disagreeing with parents about rules at home.
- o Disagreeing with brothers and sisters.
- o Having trouble in a class at school.

The group will work on the following parts of the problems:

- o Looking at the thoughts the children have about the problems, to make sure they are seeing problems accurately.
- o Coming up with a list of possible solutions about how to handle the problems.
- o Looking at the possible solutions to see the positives and negatives of each one.
- o Trying out solutions to see if they work.