

Acknowledge and Defer Strategy for Anxiety

What is the “Acknowledge and Defer” strategy?

The **Acknowledge and Defer strategy** is a method parents can use to respond to anxiety reports demonstrated by their children. When children have fears or worries, they often seek comfort and reassurance from their parents to help them manage the uncomfortable feelings of anxiety.

While this comfort can help children manage anxious feelings in the short term, children often continuously seek this comfort and reassurance each time they experience the uncomfortable feelings of anxiety in the long term. When children come to their parents multiple times per day due to fears or worries, it prevents them from enjoying the activities of daily life and leads them to miss out on daily learning opportunities.

This strategy is designed to allow parents to acknowledge the child’s emotions when they occur and provide emotional support by creating a particular time each day when their child can discuss their fears and worries. This way, the child can discuss their emotions without preventing them from engaging in daily activities. It also allows the child to practice the anxiety management strategies developed by you and their therapist. Having multiple opportunities to practice anxiety management strategies will help your child manage future anxious feelings more independently.

How do I use the “Acknowledge and Defer” strategy?

1. Tell your child that there will be a certain time each day when they will have your undivided attention to discuss their worries and their fears.
2. If your child comes to you and says they are anxious:

- First, inform them that you hear what they are telling you by acknowledging how they are feeling. Next, defer discussing your child's worry until the designated time of day.
 - For example, you could say something like, "I can see you're really worried right now. We will talk about that more after dinner."
3. To help the child cope with their anxiety in these moments, you may briefly prompt your child to use the anxiety management strategies they are working on in therapy (for example, deep breathing).
 4. Encourage your child to continue with their daily activities. The child may need help getting back into their previous activity. Briefly help them re-engage in what they were doing, and then make an exit.
 5. If the child does not wish to discuss their worries or fears during the designated time of day, they do not have to (often, they don't!). Instead, spend the time engaging in a one-on-one activity with the child.

Who do I contact with questions?

If you have questions, please call us at (734) 539-5080.

Disclaimer: This document contains information and/or instructional materials developed by University of Michigan Health for the typical patient with your condition. It may include links to online content that was not created by U-M Health and for which U-M Health does not assume responsibility. It does not replace medical advice from your health care provider because your experience may differ from that of the typical patient. Talk to your health care provider if you have any questions about this document, your condition or your treatment plan.

Author: Hannah L. Ham, PhD, LP
Reviewers: Blake Lancaster, PhD, LP, Julie Wojtaszek, MHSA, MS, TLLP

Patient Education by [University of Michigan Health](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International Public License](#). Last Revised: 11/2022