



5 Steps Toward Managing OCD

Parent/ caregiver guide

After a diagnosis of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) in a child, it might seem intuitive to modify family routines and/or participate in rituals to reduce the child's distress. Evidence shows this actually leads to greater avoidance and can make a child more isolated and unable to break out of their compulsive behavior patterns. Instead, consider the following steps to build understanding and problem-solve together:

Step 1: Engage Professionals

Seek a therapist experienced in OCD, perhaps asking your pediatrician for specialist referrals. The treatment of choice is cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), with exposure and response prevention (ERP) as a key element of the intervention. In some cases, medication may be recommended as well. It is important to know that not all therapists who treat OCD are trained in ERP.

Step 2: Learn the Symptoms

Teach your child what OCD is (persistent, intrusive thoughts and/or repetitive behaviors) and how to recognize it in themselves. The International OCD Foundation (<https://iocdf.org/about-ocd/>) is a great place to start.

Step 3: Expose and Resist

Gradually expose your child to triggering situations while they resist engaging in compulsive behaviors. Over time, facing these situations at a manageable level will help your child learn that they can do hard things and can handle uncomfortable feelings. Help your child understand that giving in to obsessive thoughts by avoiding anxiety-provoking situations or engaging in compulsions may temporarily reduce anxiety, but it will come back, perhaps stronger.

Become aware of the accommodations you, like most parents, make for OCD so that things seem easier for your children. Work carefully with your child's therapist to reduce and remove those accommodations.

Step 4: Help Manage

As the therapist teaches coping skills, your role as your child's coach is to assist them in practicing their skills while engaging in exposures at home between therapy sessions.

Support your child in using coping strategies to manage their OCD symptoms. This includes encouraging your child to "boss back," or challenge obsessive thoughts and resist the urge to engage in compulsions.



Step 5: Explore Treatment Options

In addition to CBT, there are medication options for OCD, including fluoxetine, sertraline, and fluvoxamine, which are selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs); and clomipramine, which is a tricyclic antidepressant.

If the OCD is a result of Pediatric Acute-onset Neuropsychiatric Syndrome (PANS), which involves the sudden onset of OCD and other associated neuropsychiatric symptoms, following a streptococcal or other infection, additional evaluation and treatment may be needed.



Gail A. Bernstein, MD, is a child and adolescent psychiatrist and professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at the University of Minnesota Medical School. Her clinical and research expertise includes anxiety and mood disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), and pediatric acute-onset neuropsychiatric syndrome (PANS).