Don't Let Your Child's World Shrink: Understanding Avoidance

After a traumatic event, it's normal for children to avoid things that remind them of what happened. Watching what your child avoids, and what they're willing to do, is one of the best ways to tell how they're recovering.

Two kinds of avoidance

Avoiding reminders of the event

This is normal. Don't force your child to engage directly with something that reminds them of what happened. If facing reminders is needed, it can happen gradually as part of therapy.

Avoiding things unrelated to the event

If your child is avoiding things that have nothing to do with what happened, like going to the park, running errands, or playdates, this is something to pay attention to.

Why avoidance matters

Avoidance is self-reinforcing. It tends to grow larger over time, and it reinforces feelings of fear and anxiety.

1. Something feels scary
A playdate or trip to the store brings up worry.

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2. Your child avoids it
They stay home instead.

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3. They feel relief
The worry goes away, for now.

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4. The fear grows
Next time feels even harder, and more things get avoided.

Is your child's world getting smaller?

If your child is struggling emotionally but still willing to do things they enjoyed before, that's a good sign. Being willing to engage tells you a lot about their anxiety level, how they see the world around them, and their ability to feel joy.

Returning to their normal routine

- Still going to activities they enjoy, even if they're nervous
- Seeing friends and family
- Coming along on errands and outings
- Having moments of fun and laughter

World getting smaller

- Dropping activities they used to love
- Not wanting to leave the house or be apart from you
- Saying no to playdates and outings
- The list of things they avoid keeps growing

In crisis? Call or text 988. Emergency: 911.

Gently encourage, bit by bit

You can gently encourage your child to re-engage with activities a little at a time. Each small step helps them feel safer and more confident in the world around them.

Try small steps

Break an activity into smaller pieces and move up one step at a time. For example, for a playdate:

1. Talk about it and make a plan together
2. Invite a friend over for a short visit at home
3. Meet at a park with you close by
4. A longer playdate, building up over time

Helpful ways to encourage

- **Notice and praise brave steps,** even small ones.
- **Keep routines going,** like meals, bedtimes, and extracurriculars.
- **Stay calm and confident.** Don't let your own anxiety hold your child back.
- **Don't force activities that may be triggering.** Focus on things unrelated to the event first.
- **Be patient.** Some children need more time and more steps than others.

If you are concerned about your child's recovery, watch for avoidance. Ask yourself: is my child "returning to their normal routine," or is their "world getting smaller"?

Concerned about your child? If avoidance keeps growing or gets in the way of daily life, it may be time to talk with a professional. Our therapist directory can help you find a licensed clinician: bendresilienceproject.com/providers/. Our other handouts for parents are at bendresilienceproject.com/resources/.

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