

A bath phobia

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Michael was three years old. He had been placed with his foster mum following problems at home. Michael was quiet and withdrawn on arrival, showing little interest in his new surroundings and expressing no emotion of any sort. It was therefore a shock when Michael became hysterical the first time a bath was mentioned. His refusal was total and his terror evident in his screams of "no bath!", "no bath" and his severe trembling and profuse sweating.

Attempts were made by 'mum' over several days but when Michael came close to passing out on one occasion help was sought from a behavioural psychologist. A programme was worked out to help Michael overcome his bath-time phobia.

Michael had been closely observed by his foster mum and triggers (i.e., antecedents, also called SDs) for his fear identified. These were:

- (a) The word 'bath'
- (b) The bathroom
- (c) Running the bath
- (d) Undressing prior to a bath

Initially it was decided to introduce the word 'bath' at every possible opportunity with Michael present. Books on bathroom home improvements were looked at with him and the pictures talked about. At no point was Michael invited to join in, nor was conversation relating to baths directed at him. He remained an onlooker and listener only.

After two days a wash basin was placed on the floor, on the landing. Various bath toys were placed on and around the basin which mum now called 'the bath'. At the same time the tap in the big bath was turned on and remained running throughout any periods when Michael might be nearby. To begin with Michael showed anxiety about the running tap but remained indifferent to 'the bath' (i.e., the basin).

Mum carried out routine housework which included washing Michael's face and teeth, and visiting the bathroom with him at least once an hour. At no stage was the 'tap', 'water' or 'bath' mentioned and Michael gradually relaxed and stopped avoiding close proximity to the big

bath. Mum then began placing toys into 'the bath' on the landing and also removing others. At bedtime Michael was invited to help 'mum' tidy up. "Let's put all the toys into 'the bath'" Michael joined in and soon began using the words 'the bath' in his tidy-up routine.

On the sixth day mum put water and bubbles into 'the bath' (still the small basin). Toys were lifted in and out and a new element was now included. Wet toys were dried after 'their bath'. At tidy up time mum carried the basin to the big bath and, with lots of talk of splashes and bubbles, emptied the water into it. Michael wasn't asked to help but he edged to the door to see what was happening after the second day of this stage. On the third day of this stage he helped 'mum' carry the basin and tipped the water into the big bath without anxiety.

At this point 'the bath' (i.e., the basin) was filled with lots of bubbles and moved from the landing onto a stool beside the big bath; the tap was still running. Michael first saw this new arrangement when he had his face washed. He showed curiosity but made no move to go near 'the bath'. He was taken in and out of the bathroom over the next two days and then accepted a game with 'mum' which involved much splashing and dropping toys into the big bath for her to retrieve again. Michael enjoyed this game and after only one day he was encouraged to climb into the big bath to get the toys himself. To begin with he was hesitant and clung on to 'mum' as he reached for his toys. Eventually he let go and ignored the still dribbling tap. He allowed 'mum' to remove his shoes at this stage.

Mum next decided to move 'the bath' into the big bath and she played familiar games. Michael reacted to this move by crying and refusing to go near the big bath even to observe. 'The bath' was moved back onto the stool and the climbing in and out game was reintroduced until Michael was relaxed again.

Once again 'the bath' was set into the big bath and this time Michael joined in the play. At this stage he was still fully dressed!

Next 'mum' ran about two inches of warm bubbly water into the big bath and again placed 'the bath' into it. Michael was hesitant but after a couple of attempts climbed in. Initially he stood up, holding tightly to 'mum' as played but then he sat down on his own accord.

Over the next two days the depth of the water was increased until Michael was climbing in and out of about six inches of bubbly water and playing happily. Until now 'mum' had kept her arm around Michael but gradually she increased the time she removed this support until she was able to sit on the stool close by the big bath.

The last remaining problem was to get Michael to undress! To begin with he was undressed to his underclothes in the bedroom and allowed to keep these on until he was in the water. After the third day of this stage he took his last clothes off himself and trotted off himself into the bathroom.

After three weeks 'mum' took the portable phone into Michael in the bath and he cheerfully announced to our friendly psychologist "Michael's in the bath Mickey!".

Breakdown of steps

Days

1, 2 Word 'bath' used frequently

3, 4, 5 Basin called 'the bath' set onto the landing full of toys. At the same time the bath tap was allowed to run constantly. Tidy-up game involved Michael and words 'the bath' were used frequently.

6 Water added to 'the bath' and toys dried after 'their bath'.

7 Tidy-up involved mum first emptying water into big bath,

8 then Michael joining in and helping.

9, 10, 11 'The bath' moved into bathroom. Toys dropped into big bath. These were collected by 'mum' and then Michael.

12 'The bath' moved into big bath. Michael reacted by crying and displaying general signs of anxiety.

13 Retraced to steps described on day 9.

14, 15 'The bath' moved back into the big bath.

16 Water introduced to big bath.

17 Water level increased in big bath.

18 Water level increased in big bath and 'mum's' arm gradually removed.

19 Michael undressed prior to bath play

20 Phoned Mickey!