



Patrick

Getting Back in the Door

Addressing School Avoidance in the Transitioning
Back to School During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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October 14, 2021



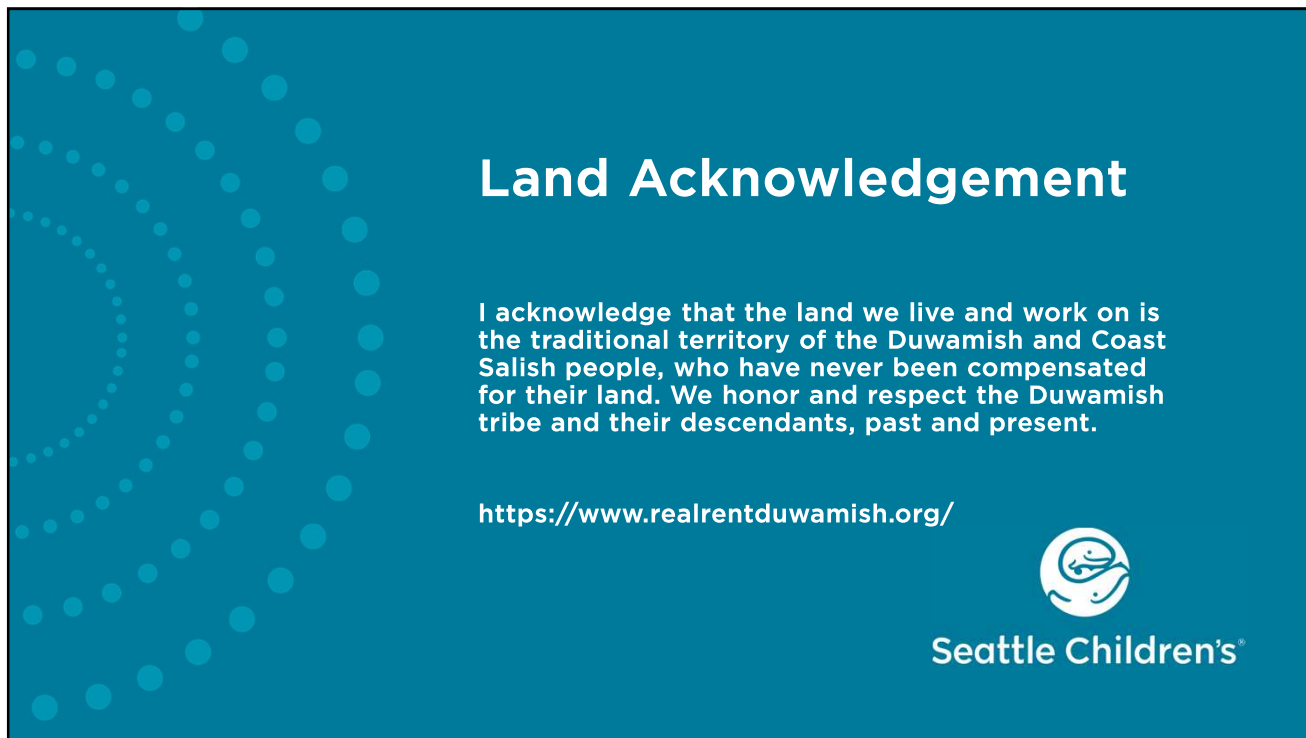
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Speaker Disclosure



- I have no actual or potential conflict of interest in relation to this program/presentation.


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Land Acknowledgement

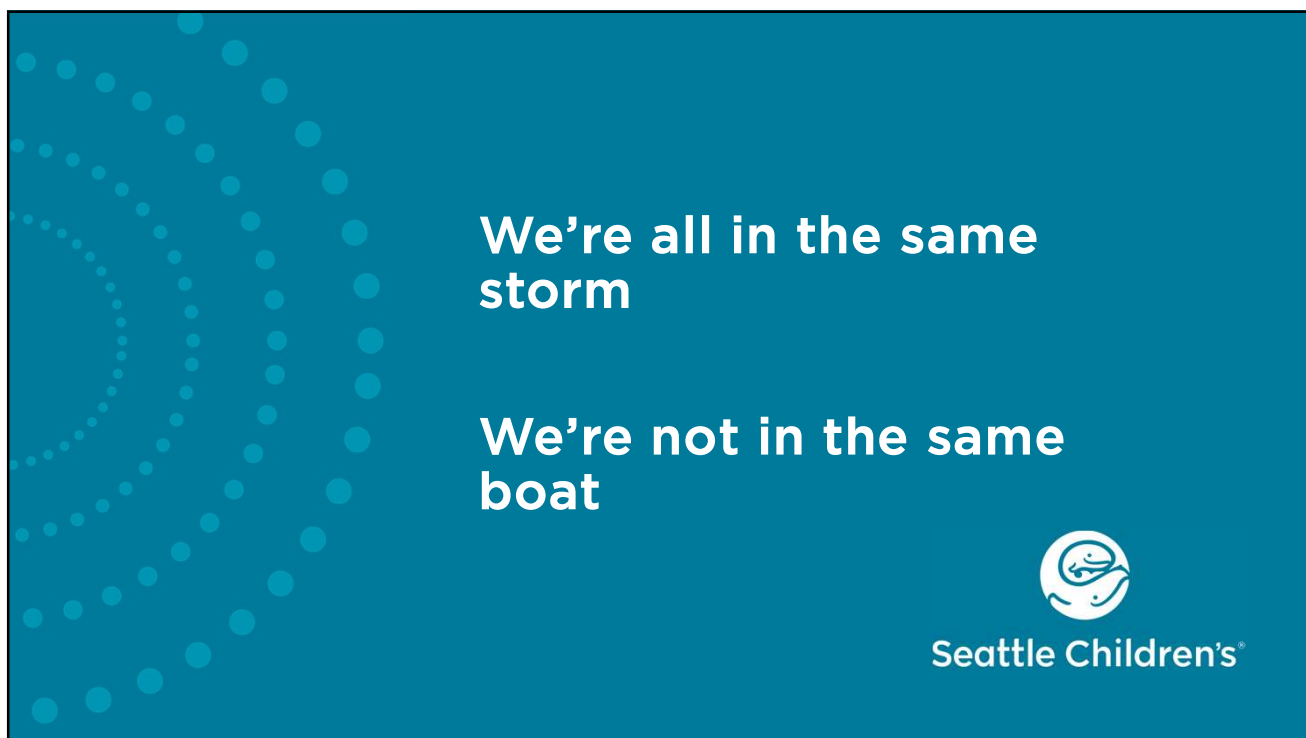
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We're all in the same storm

We're not in the same boat



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**The times we're in:
A note about COVID-19, the Mental Health Cascade, and equity**



Anticipation of long-term mental health impact on youth due to COVID-19 related factors:

- Worry about contracting the illness
- Isolation due to quarantine restrictions
- Impact on social determinants of health (e.g., food insecurity)
- Increased caregiver stress
- Decreased access to typical mental and physical health resources in school-based and some community settings

Mental Health expects anticipate an interaction between disproportionate rates/severity of impact of COVID-19 on communities of color and preexisting disparities in access to MH care for these groups.

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Defining School Avoidance



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School Avoidance/Refusal



- "Refusal" vs. "Avoidance"
- Common definition of school refusal (Maynard et al., 2015)
 - Reluctance, refusal to attend school resulting in absences (behavioral dysregulation)
 - Stay at home with parents' knowledge vs. hiding it
 - Emotional distress at idea of attending school (somatic complaints, unhappiness, anxiety)
 - Absence of severe antisocial behavior
 - Parental efforts to improve school attendance
- Not an official disorder; symptom of multiple presenting concerns
 - Approximately 50% of school refusal cases are due to anxiety (e.g. Walter et al., 2010)

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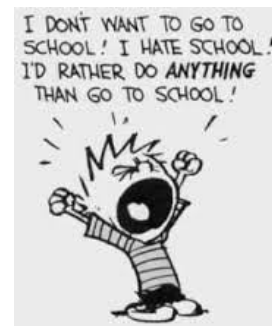
Absenteeism is not always school avoidance

- Illness keeps child home *per medical advice*
- Objective school climate issues (e.g., threats to safety, needs not met)
- Other psychosocial factors prevent school attendance
 - Family dysfunction – low supervision, permissiveness
 - Parents withdraw child from school
 - Lack of resources (housing, food, transportation)
 - Presence of other primary diagnosis (e.g., psychosis, substance use)
- Truancy
 - Lack of fear, hide absences from caregivers, antisocial behavior, not staying at home, lack of interest in schoolwork

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Why fight this battle?

- It is really important for youth to go to school regularly
 - Academic learning
 - Social development
 - Access to needed resources for special needs
- If they do not attend school *due to avoidance*
 - Avoidance reinforces anxiety and other emotional patterns
 - The longer kids stay out of school, the harder it is for them to return
 - Snowball effect for work, friendships, etc
 - Decreased routine and social activities = increased risk for depression
 - Persistent avoidance = increased risk for dropping out and subsequent problems
 - Economic, marital, and social problems (e.g., difficulty obtaining and maintaining employment).



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Four main reasons youth avoid school

- Many youth will avoid school for multiple reasons
- May start with one reason, and become another
- Avoidance affects the whole system
- Regardless of the reason, routine is really important!

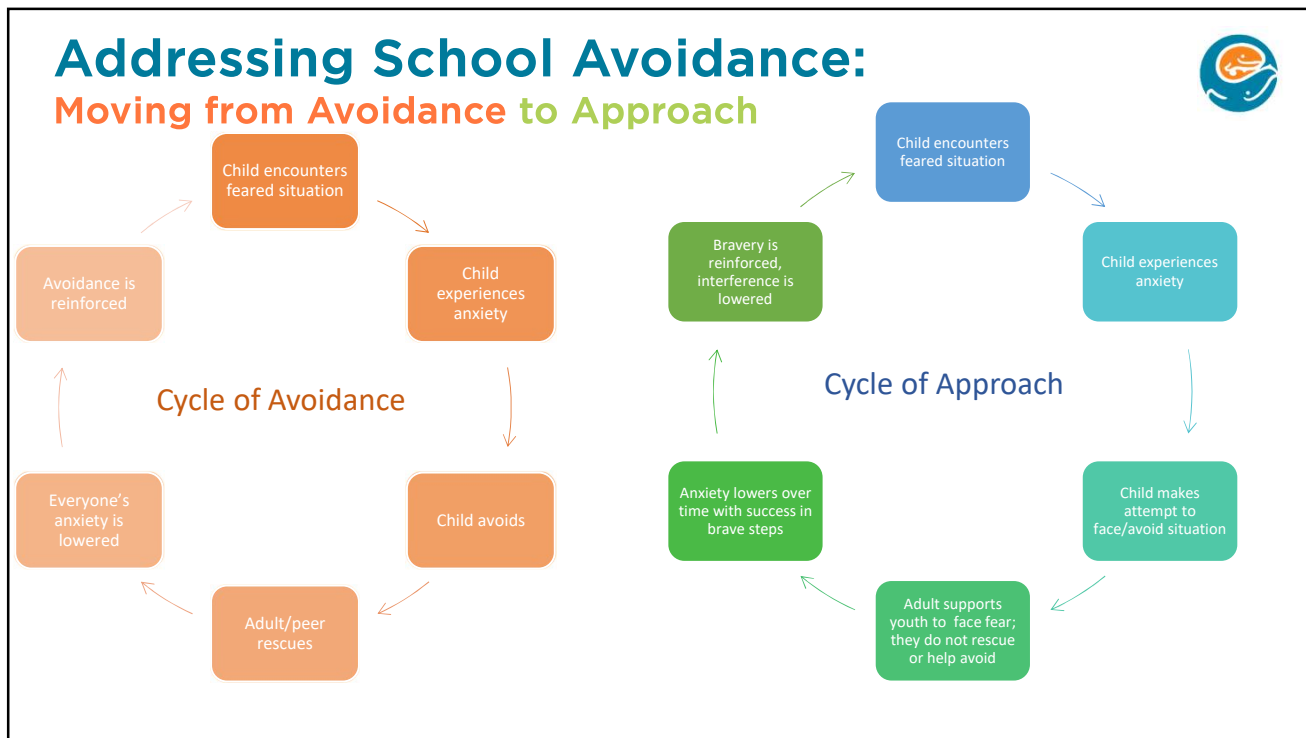


Avoidance-based reasons	Reward-based reasons
To avoid school-related situations that increase negative affect (e.g., anxiety, irritability)	Attention
To escape aversive situations (e.g., social, evaluative)	Tangible Rewards

Kearney, C.A. & Albano, A.M. (2007). *When Children Refuse School: A Cognitive 2nd edition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press



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A common reason: Identifying Anxiety (during a pandemic)

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Normalizing anxiety and other big emotions



Is your child experiencing anxiety during a global pandemic?

Of course they are!!!

- A note about anxiety:
 - Anxiety is your body's natural, internal alarm system
 - It is a normal, adaptive feeling- not something to get rid of
 - Think of a fire/smoke alarm- we have to have them!
 - Problematic anxiety = alarm going off when there is no fire
 - Want to recalibrate the alarm not remove the batteries

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Flavors of anxiety!



- Anxiety is like ice cream: there are lots of different flavors
 - We eat them all the same way (the intervention is the same)!
- Common themes
 - Worry about health and safety
 - Germs/contamination
 - Separating from primary caregivers or other safety figures
 - Social situations
 - Worry about grades/doing well enough
 - The unknown!
 - Failure



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What does anxiety look like?



- **Avoidance**
 - Not speaking, reluctance to answer in class
 - Overdoing work to avoid failure/uncertainty
- **Body reactions/complaints**
 - Frequent trips to the nurse, asks to go home, or complaints about illness that are unfounded
- **Sleep and eating difficulties**
 - Eating less at school or avoiding the cafeteria
- **Excessive reassurance seeking**
 - Checking in about rules or due dates when they are typically remembered and followed by this child
- **Inattention, poor school performance**
- **School avoidance**
 - Periods of missing school to avoid aversive experiences at school
- **Angry outbursts in effort to avoid**

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What can we do about it?



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Talk it out



- **Validate their emotions- All feelings are ok**
 - “You’re worried, I hear you”
 - “It seems like you’re feeling angry/scared/sad”
 - Tie emotions to physical experiences to make sure they don’t confuse this with being sick
- **Calm, open conversations**
 - Model coping with emotions, not mastery over them
 - Avoid abject reassurance
 - Instead, encourage with honesty
- **Thoughts to hold on to**
 - Name anxiety when you hear/see it
 - Help them to be critical consumers of their own thoughts
 - What are helpful and true thoughts to hold on to?

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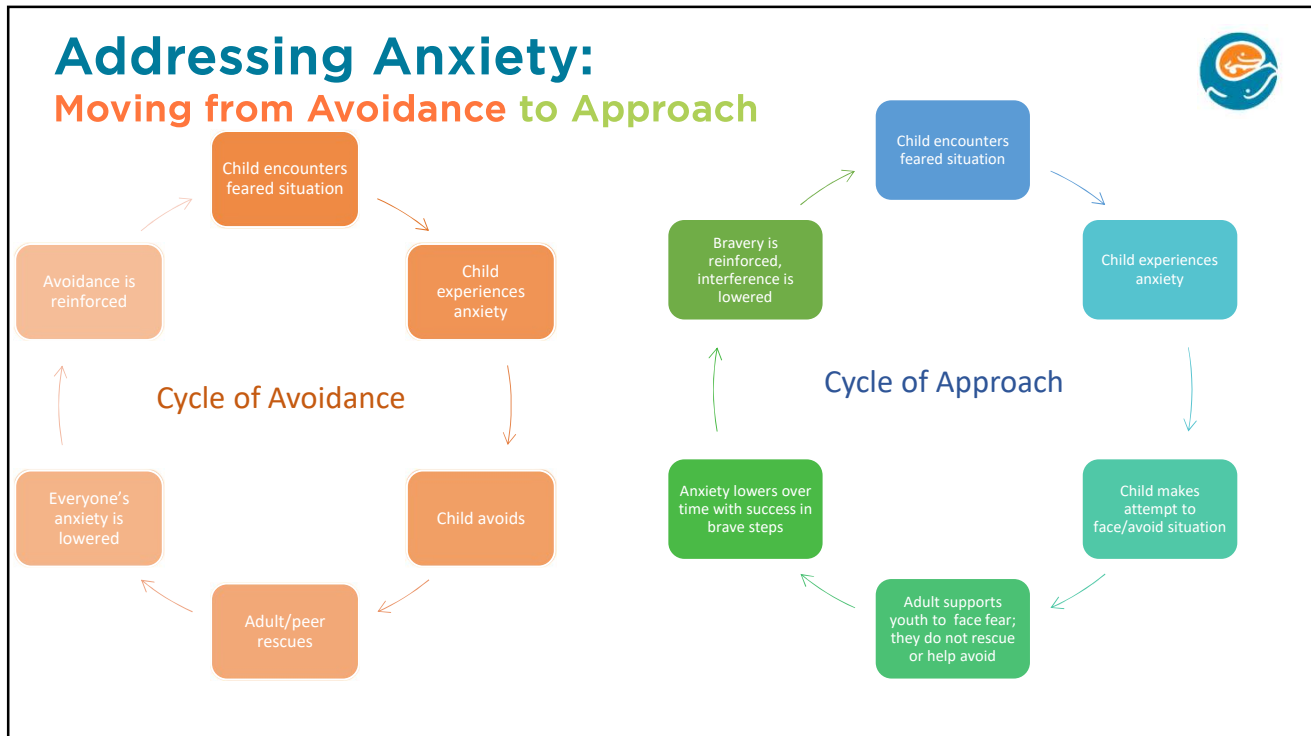


Most importantly: Help youth face their fears

(also known as exposures, per the cognitive behavioral therapy model)

This often involves parents/caregivers facing fears, too.

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Ways to face fears

Depends on the fear or worry!

- Practice:
 - Going up to the school building (a “dry run for day one”)
 - Getting answers wrong
 - Talking to other people or ordering for yourself
 - Wearing masks around other people

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Supporting Youth with Anxiety



Lebowitz, 2021

“I know this is hard, and I know you can do it.”

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Remember, caregivers



- You set the tone
 - How you talk about things in front of your child
 - What you model with your behavior
- You are your child’s mirror
 - How dangerous the world is
 - Their ability to cope with hard things

This is hard- take care of yourself!



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Remember:

When youth take steps to face fears and
choose bravery in the face of anxiety:

**Praise
Reward**


The behavior you pay attention to is the
one more likely to happen again

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Supporting Youth with Anxiety at School



- Common pitfall: Tendency toward accommodation
 - Sometimes formalized in 504 plans/IEPs
 - Examples of contraindicated static accommodations for anxiety:
 - Extra time
 - Not calling on a student
 - Allowing avoidance of specific activities
 - Not bad but not helpful- not primary interventions
 - Relaxation strategies
 - Journaling
- Required- partnership from all parties (parents, teachers, specialists)

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If your child starts to refuse school:



- Set clear attendance goals with an eye for facing fears
 - List out the steps between where we are and where we are aiming
- What happens if you do and what happens if you don't
 - Tie rewards to meeting those steps on a daily basis
 - Be clear about what happens if they don't get to school
 - Must have clear criteria for "sick days" or other reasons youth would realistically be excused
- Use your attention wisely
 - Increase attention for brave behavior
 - Decrease attention for anxious avoidance
- Partner with school- who on that team can help support you?
 - Get in the door, make steps toward the classroom
 - Encourage your child with goal setting

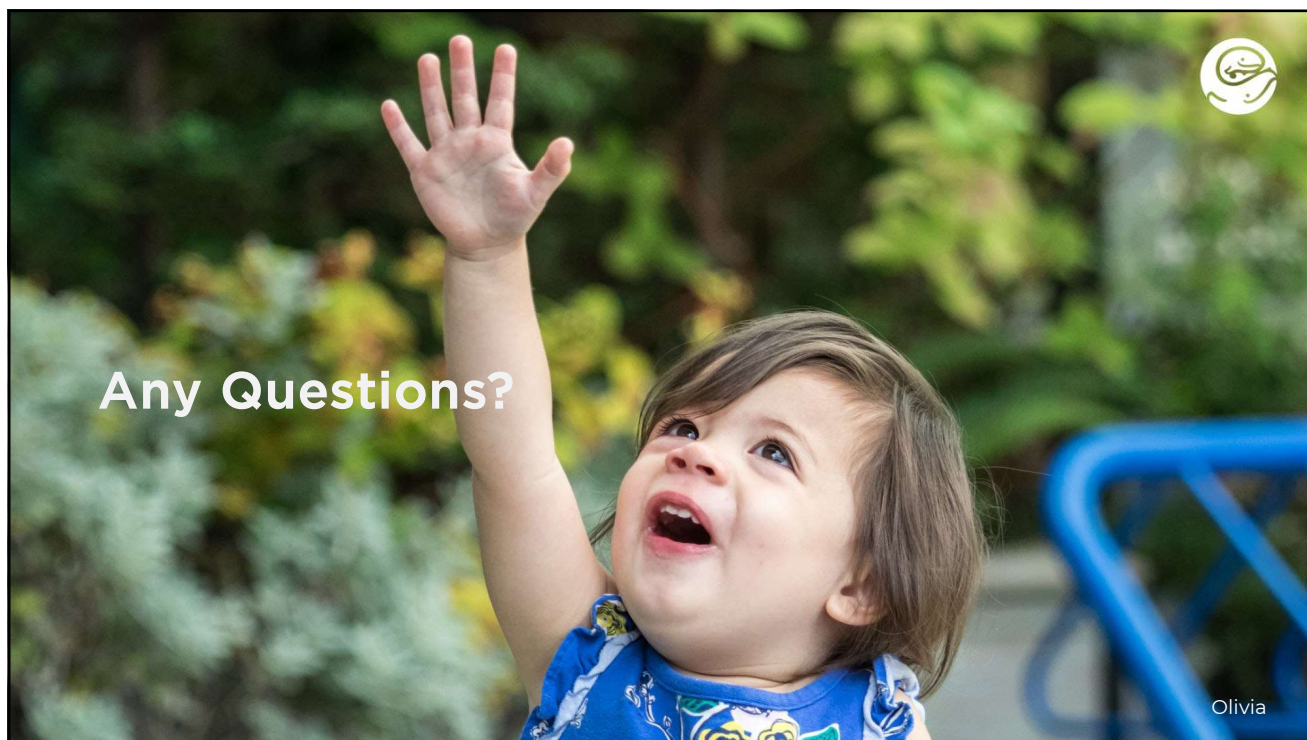
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Setting goals at school:

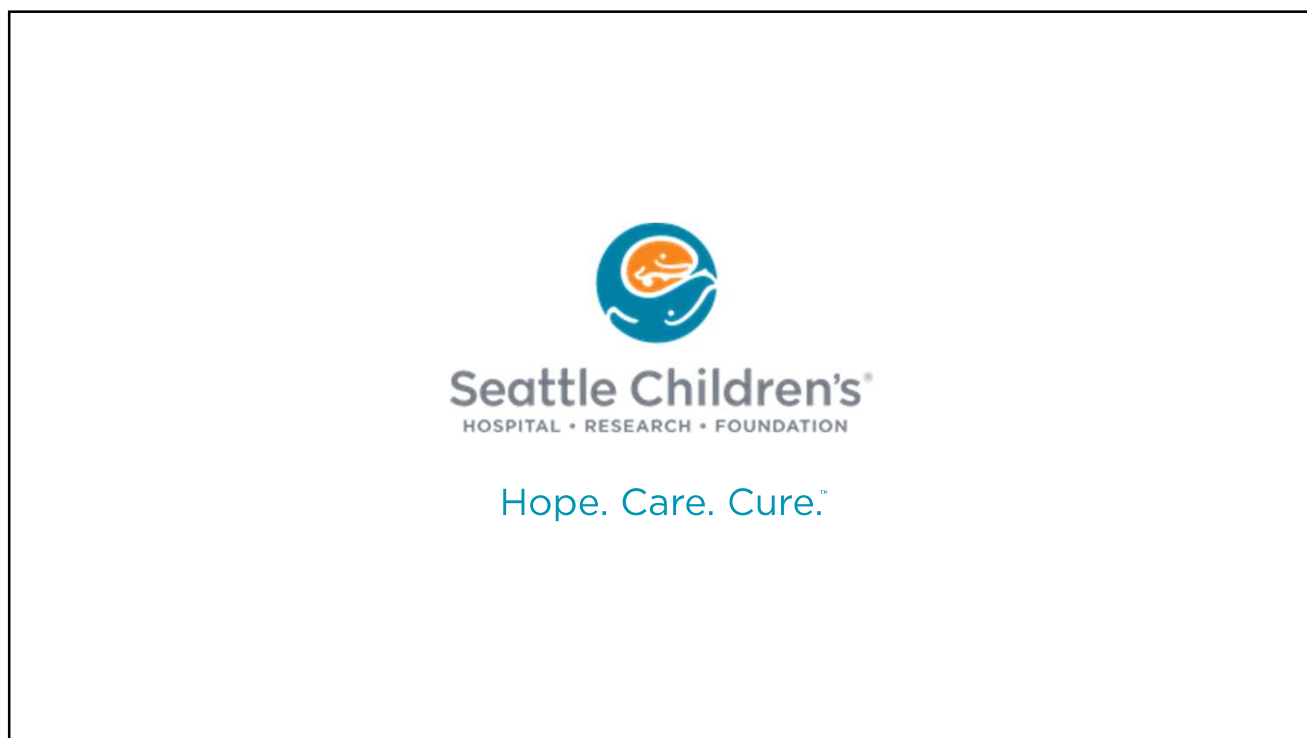


Name:									
Date:									
Goals	Tracker	Goal	Tracker	Goal	Tracker	Goal	Tracker	Goal	
1. Walk in independently		☺		☺		☺		☺	
2. Whisper to teacher 3x		☺		☺		☺		☺	
3. Staying for a full day		☺		☺		☺		☺	
Total number of ☺:									
___ /12 = ___%									
<i>Teacher's initials/signature:</i>									
<i>Additional comments:</i>									
<i>Parent signature:</i>									
<i>Home reward:</i>									

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