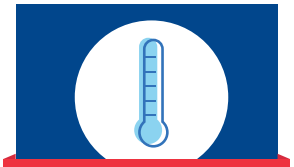
PARENT HANDOUT:

FEAR THERMOMETER

Boston Children's Hospital
Until every child is well™



Anxiety Skill 1

What is a Fear Thermometer?

- You may notice that your teen worries, or gets anxious, during many kinds of situations. They may also avoid certain situations or things. The anxiety may feel like it comes out of nowhere, which can make it hard for your teen to describe what exactly makes them anxious. To begin managing your teen's anxiety, you need to help them name the problem.
- A fear thermometer is a tool that can do just that. A fear thermometer helps your teen organize or rank the things and situations that make them anxious. The things/situations that make your teen only a little worried are near a 1 on the thermometer. The things/situations that make your teen the most worried are usually near the 10 on the thermometer.
- Once you and your teen have a better understanding of their worries, you can use the fear thermometer to help your teen plan ways to face their fears. These techniques can help them realize they can still do things they want and need to do even when they are worried.

Here's How to Create a Fear Thermometer

You can use the following script with your teen and they can follow along in the teen worksheets:

1. **Introduce the idea.** "Everyone feels worried sometimes. In fact, our anxious feelings can sometimes be useful and important signals that help keep us safe. Other times, worries can get out of hand and make us too scared to do the things we need to and want to do. Today we are going to make a special thermometer that will help us name the things you're worried about. Doing this will help us figure out when you need help with your worries. Together we will figure out ways to solve problems and face your fears."
2. **Look at the example.** "Let's look at this example. The thermometer goes from 1 to 10. This teenager is afraid of frogs! At the bottom near 1 it says, "seeing a frog," because that's something that makes the teen who made this a little worried. At 3 it has "a frog jumping near me" because that makes the teen a little more worried. The thermometer keeps going up like that until we get to 10, "holding a frog", the situation that causes this teen to feel the most worried."
3. **List worries.** "Before you make your thermometer, let's list all of the things you are worried about. We don't have to put them in order yet, just name everything you can think of. If you like, I can give you suggestions from things you've told me and what I've noticed."
4. **Rate the worries and put them on the thermometer.** "Great job! Naming all of these things and talking about them is an important step to feeling less worried and anxious. Okay, now that we have our whole list, let's see where they go on the thermometer. Let's start with the first fear you wrote. Where would that fit on the thermometer: at the bottom near 1, at the top near 10, or somewhere in the middle?" Wait for your teen to name the fear, give it a rating, and put it on the thermometer. "That makes sense, great job! Let's keep going." Move on to the next fear on the list.
5. **Use the Fear Thermometer to plan next steps.** "We will keep the Fear Thermometer handy as we continue to work through this guide. The Fear Thermometer will be a tool to help us understand your worries and pay attention to when you might need help. When these worry situations come up, you will use the skills we are going to learn in this guide to help." If you notice that your teen has a lot of unrelated, more generalized worries (e.g., if friends like them, midterm exams, spending the night away from home, etc.), you can use Anxiety Skills 2 and 3 (Relaxation Skills and Thinking Traps) to help them learn tools to cope. If you notice that your teen has fears of a specific situation or thing (e.g., animals or heights), the other skills in this guide will be very beneficial, but it will be essential to use Anxiety Skill 4 (Facing Your Fears) to help them learn to face their fears instead of avoiding them.

TEEN WORKSHEET:

FEAR THERMOMETER EXAMPLE

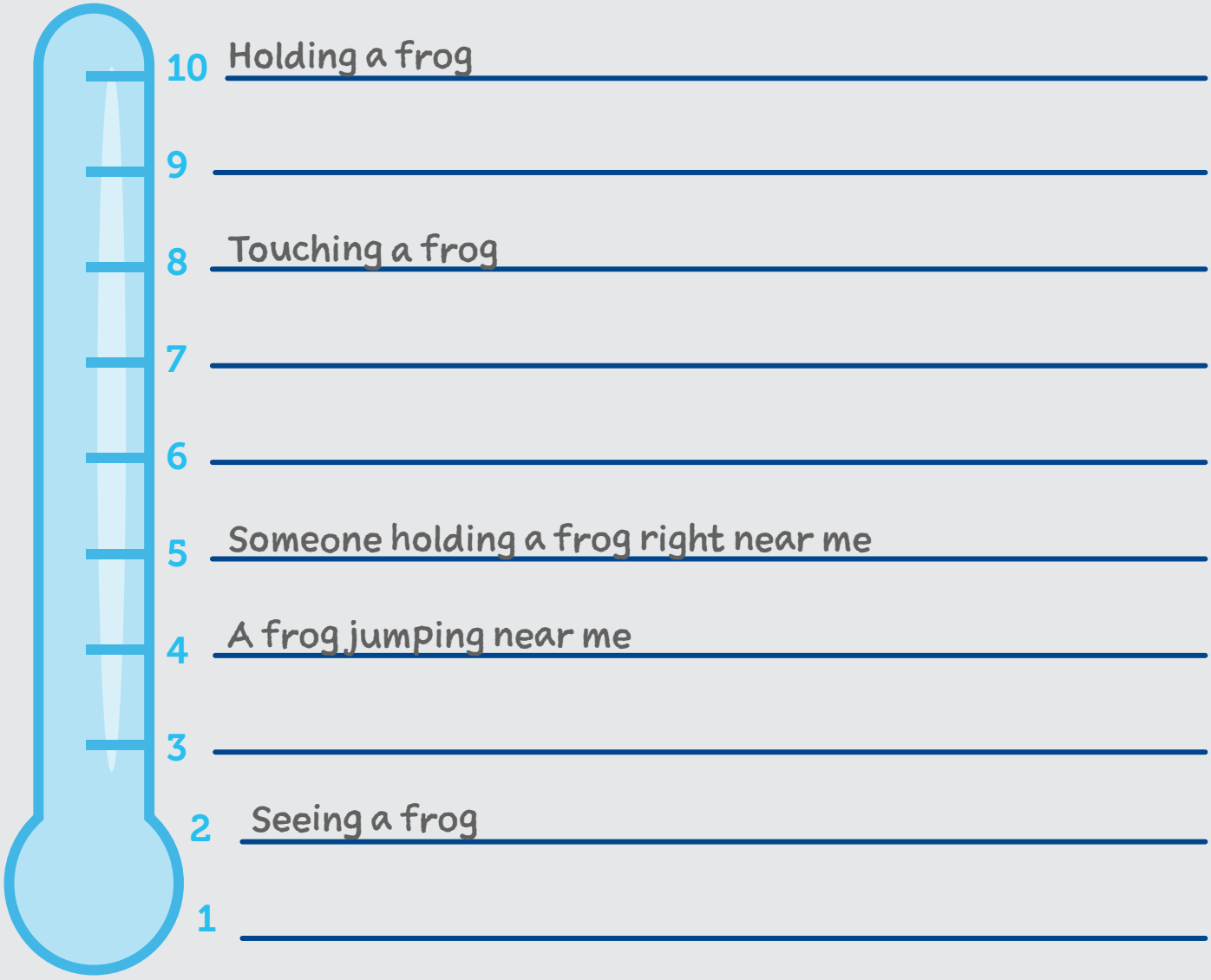
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Anxiety Skill 1

Use this space to brainstorm all the things you are worried about, in no particular order:

frogs
someone holding a frog near me
seeing a frog
holding a frog
touching a frog
a frog jumping near me

Start with the first fear you wrote. Where would that fit on the thermometer: at the bottom near 1, at the top near 10, or somewhere in the middle? Write it down and move on to the next fear.



TEEN WORKSHEET:

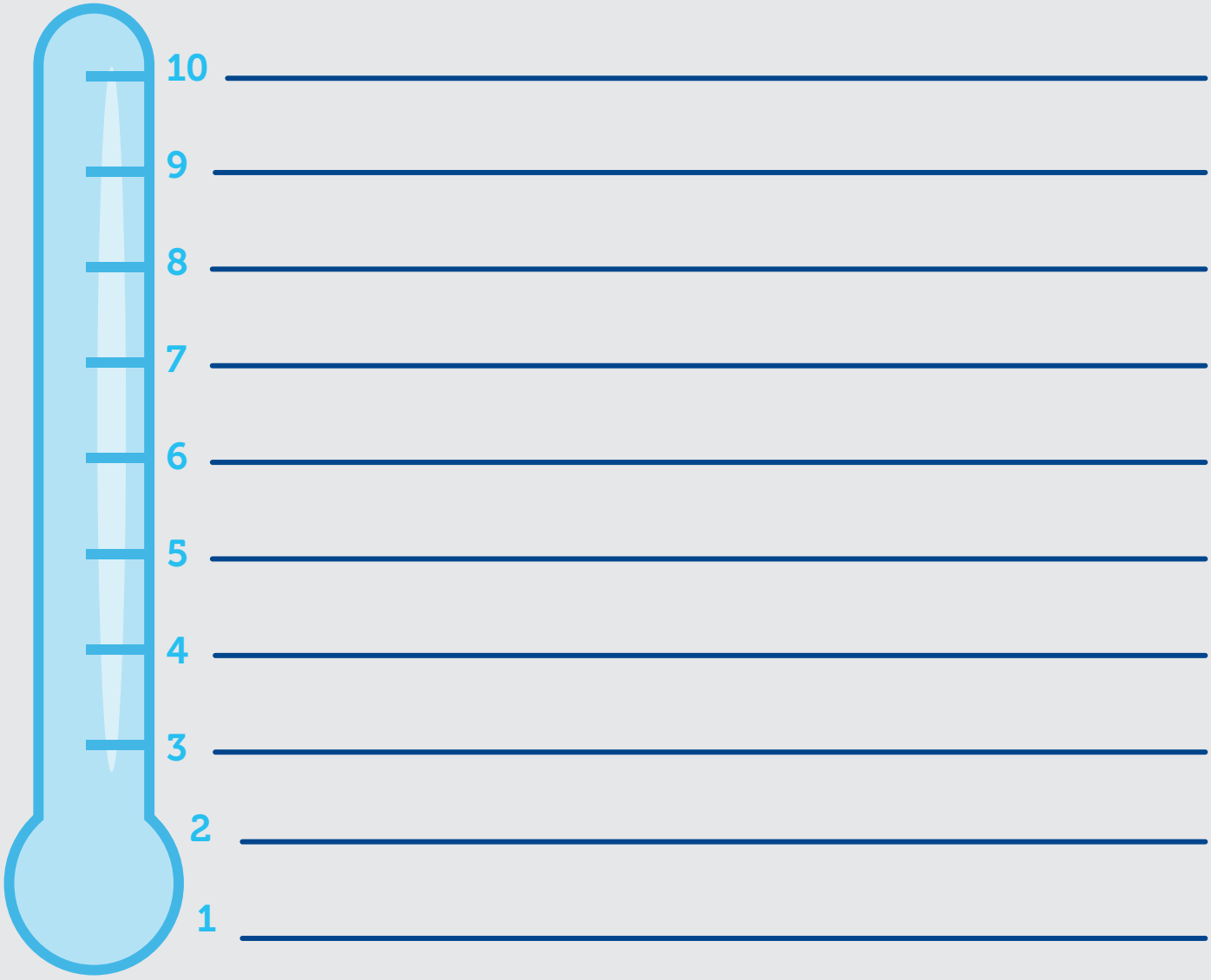
MY FEAR THERMOMETER

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Anxiety Skill 1

Use this space to brainstorm all the things you are worried about, in no particular order:

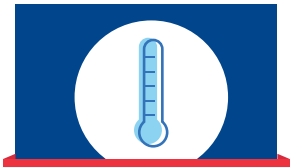
Start with the first fear you wrote. Where would that fit on the thermometer: at the bottom near 1, at the top near 10, or somewhere in the middle? Write it down and move on to the next fear.



PARENT HANDOUT:

FEAR THERMOMETER TIPS

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Anxiety Skill 1

How Can Using a Fear Thermometer Help My Family?

- Learning the details about what things or situations make your teen feel worried is a very important first step towards successfully managing their anxiety.
- Increasing your understanding of your teen's anxiety through this process will help you be more aware of when to support your teen in situations that cause them stress.
- Learning to identify and express worried feelings helps you and your teen notice when a coping strategy (like the Relaxation Skills in Anxiety Skill 2) will be helpful.
- Creating a fear thermometer will also help you and your teen make a plan for facing fears. They will be able to start with facing fears that are lower on their list in their ranking list and move up the thermometer as they feel braver (see Anxiety Skill 4, Facing Your Fears).

Common Parent Concerns

My teen finds it hard to rank their fears.

Rating fears can seem strange at first. Show your teen the example in this guide to help them understand how to describe their fear. Ask questions to help them rate each fear (e.g., "Is it scarier to speak in a small group or to speak in front of the whole class?). Let your teen know that you can change the ratings as needed so they don't have to be "perfect."

My teen rates everything at a 1 or a 10.

Ordering things from least to greatest worry is a hard concept. If you notice that your teen went through their whole list and rated each thing without using the middle ratings, gently ask them if there are some things that might go in the middle. You might say, "I wonder if there are some things that don't make you super worried (so less than 10) but also make you feel more than a little worried (so more than 1)?" Ask them to rate something fun (e.g., ranking foods from not tasty to the most delicious, or heights of family members from shortest to tallest) so they can practice the task.

My teen gets upset while trying to make the ratings.

Thinking about worries can cause "in the moment" anxiety for many teens, If your teen is having a hard time, take a break from making the fear thermometer to relax and then come back to it. Let your teen know that many people feel anxious when talking about their worries, but that it's important to do this exercise because in the end it will help them understand their anxiety and feel better.

Your teen may also benefit from learning relaxation skills to manage anxious feelings. Try some of the strategies in Anxiety Skill 2 and see if they make talking about the fear thermometer easier for them. They can also use the fear thermometer to remember to use relaxation skills (e.g., when your teen's rating gets above a 4, it may be time to take some slow, deep breaths).

I don't think my teen's ratings are accurate.

If one of your teen's ratings feels very off, talk to them about that specific rating and things you've noticed about the situation. For example, "You put talking in front of the class as least scary. You labeled it a 2. I remember you seemed very worried about your last history project, more worried than you seem about ordering food at a restaurant. What do you think?". If your teen won't change the ranking right then, leave it be and revisit the thermometer later. 100% accuracy isn't as important as your teen feeling ownership over their thermometer.