

# Staying safe: The 'fawn' response

When children experience a real or perceived threat, their body's alarm system gets switched on. This alarm causes the parts of the brain that help them think and make decisions to partly switch off, and their body becomes focused on staying alive. This survival instinct makes them go into fight, flight, freeze or fawn mode. Let's talk fawn.

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## What is the fawn response?

Fawn has been added as one of our main survival responses, joining fight, flight and freeze. It is a stress response where a child develops people-pleasing behaviours to avoid conflict and harm, and to establish and maintain their sense of safety.

## Why do we fawn? Instinct, not intentional

Our body's alarm system and its inbuilt responses of fight, flight and freeze are the same biological responses our ancestors used when they were faced with a threat.

Fawn is a relatively new addition to our understanding of these stress responses and is often linked with relational trauma – that is, trauma that happens within a close relationship.

Children who have experienced trauma may have been taught by their carers to deny their own needs. They tend to do this because they don't feel loved or accepted by them and want to avoid further harm. They think if they forgo their own wants to appease and make others happy, they may prove their worthiness to them.

It is important to know, behaviours associated with the fawn response are part of how the body instinctively tries to protect against what is frightening the child, and carers should not see these instances as the child intentionally behaving in this way.

## What does fawn look like?

A child in fawn mode may:

- ✓ be overly compliant
- ✓ tell adults what they think they want to hear
- ✓ try to please or satisfy others – people pleasing
- ✓ put other people's needs before their own
- ✓ not ask for help
- ✓ submit to what others want
- ✓ struggle to say 'no'
- ✓ be easily peer-pressured
- ✓ have poor boundaries.

It's also important to know, a child in fawn mode may look like they are socially engaged, but that does not necessarily mean they are feeling okay.

## How can you help?

When a child is feeling unsafe and goes into fawn mode, you should:

- ✓ recognise and respond to the child's needs
- ✓ teach the child to name their feelings and validate them
- ✓ promote healthy relationships with safe and consistent boundaries
- ✓ promote the child's self-esteem and confidence
- ✓ help the child identify and do things they are interested in
- ✓ play the 'Would you rather...' game to help the child practice choosing and making decisions – for example, bath or shower, pizza or pasta
- ✓ help the child practice saying 'no'
- ✓ help the child do yoga, especially strong poses like Warrior
- ✓ mirror dance moves – let the child lead
- ✓ have a separate job list for adults and children – this is to limit the child's attempts to have adult responsibilities.

Remember: **'Fawn'** is occurring because the child is afraid. Help them to feel safe. Also check out our resources on the other survival responses – fight, flight and freeze from our website.



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**Here to help!** Come and talk to us if you'd like more practical ways you can be trauma informed.

Go to Child and Youth Protection Services at [www.communityservices.act.gov.au](http://www.communityservices.act.gov.au)

*Note: The terms 'child' and 'children' also refer to 'young person' and 'young people'.*

Sources:

- > Van der Kolk, B.A. (2015). *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. New York, New York: Penguin Books.
- > Australian Childhood Foundation (2022). *Trauma Expression and Connection Assessment (TECA)*.
- > Journey to Wellness (n.d.). *Nervous system states: Threat Responses – Animal Edition*

