

# Lifestyles



Stefani Cohen along with Fozzie developed a 10-step protocol for children to overcome anxiety and fear of canines.

## The dog's all right

A therapist teaches children to overcome fear of dogs, with a helping 'paw' from Fozzie

By DEBORAH ANDERS

**S**tefani Cohen grew up in Connecticut with a lot of animals: horses, guinea pigs, cats and dogs.

"It was just a part of my life to interact with them," said Cohen.

So, it came as a surprise when Cohen realized that Becky, her 4-year-old daughter at the time, was petrified of dogs, refusing to go on playdates or family visits because she was afraid she might encounter one.

"I couldn't believe it. I thought maybe I had done something or she had seen something happen. She hadn't. She was just afraid," said Cohen, who raised her family in Edgemont and now lives in New Rochelle.

Finding few resources to help children overcome their fear of dogs and achieve the comfort, confidence and joy from normal interactions with them, Cohen — with the help of her own dog, Fozzie — developed a 10-step protocol based on exposure therapy, a process that gradually increases a person's exposure to the source of their fear and anxiety.

Three decades later, Cohen is an expert

in the field, successfully teaching children and their parents how to understand, "read" and approach dogs. Last fall, she published a book based on her strategy, "Helping Children Overcome Their Fear of Dogs: A Step-by-Step Guide for Parents." It is designed for parents of children aged 5-12 but can also be used with older children and adults.

Cohen says parents assume their child will just get over or grow out of a fear of dogs, clinically known as cynophobia.

"Many well-intentioned people force their sweet golden retriever onto kids saying, 'There's nothing to be afraid of.' But this is contraindicated," said Cohen. "The fear is real. It can be debilitating and affects not only the child but the entire family."

Cohen worked with one child who dodged sleepovers and soccer practice, and she has known another child who ran into traffic to avoid a dog.

"Cynophobia is different from a lot of other animal phobias because while you can avoid some animals, like spiders or birds, it is virtually impossible to live in this world and avoid dogs," she said.

"Children are afraid of things they don't understand and need information about the way dogs behave and communicate. They also need to know how to stay safe around them. Dogs rarely bite out of the blue. Kids should be taught to respect dogs and their body language that says, 'I'm uncomfortable' or 'I need space' so they can avoid an unpleasant interaction with a dog, or worse, a dog bite.

"As parents we teach kids to look both ways before crossing the street, to 'stop, drop and roll' in a fire and not to touch a hot stove. But most parents don't teach children when it's safe to approach and greet a dog and when it's best to stay away," said Cohen.

### Causes of cynophobia

Cohen categorizes four possible causes of cynophobia in children: an incident, such as getting bitten or knocked down by a dog; witnessing a hostile dog encounter; hearing a fear-provoking story about a dog; or a generalized misunderstanding of dog behavior. With young children, she addresses a 'fear scale' of small, medium, big. With older children, it is from one to 10.

"I encourage parents to use phrases like, 'We're working on being more comfortable around dogs' instead of 'getting over the fear.' Because every time you say 'fear,' it goes into the brain and gets imprinted," said Cohen. "I put it in a more positive way."

During the initial assessment Cohen finds out what, specifically, the child is afraid of. Some kids don't actually know, but others say they don't want to be jumped on; they don't want to see the dog's teeth or eyes; some are afraid of germs.

Fozzie, Cohen's 11-year-old keeshond, is very much a part of her therapy. Keeshonds are known to be kind toward children and have been used as therapy dogs to assist survivors of the attacks on 9/11. Exposure therapy with a gentle dog gradually builds a person's confidence so they can handle more frequent and longer exposures to the situation that generates their fear. The child's fears should gradually diminish as their controlled exposure to well-behaved dogs increases.

Exercises will progress from merely being near a dog, to eventually petting and walking a well-behaved and friendly dog. A breakthrough can take anywhere from one to six sessions.

"In the book we teach deep breathing and coping skills. If a child sees a dog approaching that is not on a leash, they learn to ask its owner to leash their dog. We also discuss what to do if a dog approaches and you feel afraid. You stand very still like a tree or crouch like a rock. The dog may sniff you but will get bored quickly," she said. "But if a dog is approaching and the child feels nervous, I instruct them to turn sideways, cross their arms and look away. Children also learn how to greet a dog and when to stay away. You don't pet a dog that looks hurt or scared."

Cohen supplies fun, user-friendly progress sheets, gold star achievement certificates and even a superhero cape for "graduates."

With an increase in dog adoptions during the pandemic came an uptick in reported dog bites, but no one needs to live in fear of dogs, said Cohen.

"Our goal is to give children and adults the tools they need to feel confident and safe around dogs so they can enjoy the human-dog relationship, or at least coexist peacefully. When kids overcome that fear, the sense of competence and empowerment and bravery that they feel is just remarkable."

"Overcoming Your Child's Fear of Dogs: A Step-by-Step Guide for Parents" is available at [www.stefanicohen.com](http://www.stefanicohen.com) or on amazon.com.