

**Growing Concerns**  
**A question and answer column with Dr. Marti Erickson**  
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Question: My six-year-old niece recently went on a canoeing trip in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area where she was stung by a bee for the first time. Now she won't spend any time outdoors for fear of bees. She starts to cry and pitch a fit if anyone lingers outside for even a moment. This is hard to deal with and I wonder if there is anything I can do to help her overcome this fear.

Answer: It's hard enough to deal with an irrational, unfounded fear; but when fear is grounded in a real, recent, painful event, it can be all-consuming. I'd suggest that for now, you and your niece's parents try not to make a big deal out of her fear – and not push her too hard to be outside, especially at this time of year when the bees are so thick. You can begin by acknowledging her feelings (for example, simply saying, “Yes, getting stung by that bee must have been really scary”). At the same time, it also will be important for her to see you and others going calmly about your outside activities even when the bees are around. She may need to see over and over again that people can be outside and still not get stung. Beyond that, there are some steps you can take that may help her become more comfortable being outside in the long run.

- To help her actively master her fear, read together about bees and their behavior, with a focus on helping your niece understand as much as possible about how bees work, what attracts them, and what leads them to sting. The more she knows about bees, the more she will understand that, despite her unfortunate experience, they're not out to get her.
- Teach her steps she can take to protect herself from bees when she is outside. For example, teach her to avoid fragrances that attract bees and to leave the sweet food in the house so they won't try to come to her picnic. Teach her to hold still if a bee comes near her, rather than startling it by swatting suddenly.
- Trust time to help put her fear of bees in perspective. The stinging incident is very fresh in her mind right now, but it probably will fade with time. And, as she matures, she will be better able to decide to take a calculated risk, knowing that the pleasures of playing outside outweigh the risk of another sting.

Fortunately, the bee season soon will be over and your niece can safely enjoy outdoor activities again. Hopefully, by the time the bees are out again next year, her intense fear will have subsided. But if that is not the case, and her fear interferes with her ability to enjoy ordinary outdoor activities, you may want to seek help from a psychologist who specializes in desensitizing people who have overwhelming fears or phobias. Focused, short-term treatment can be very effective in helping people learn to master their fears and get back into the swing of normal activities.

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