

CHILDREN & PHOBIAS

David Lowenstein, Ph.D.

Everyone, from the youngest child to the oldest adult, experiences anxieties and fears at one time or another. Feeling anxious in a particularly uncomfortable situation never feels very good. However, with children, such feelings are not only normal, they're also necessary. Experiencing and dealing with anxieties can prepare young people to handle the unsettling experiences and challenging situations of life.

Anxieties and Fears Are Normal

Anxiety is defined as "apprehension without apparent cause." It usually occurs when there's no immediate threat to a person's safety or well being, but the threat feels real. Anxiety makes a person want to escape the situation - fast. The heart beats quickly, the body might begin to perspire, and "butterflies" in the stomach soon follow. However, a little bit of anxiety can actually help people stay alert and focused.

Having fears or anxieties about certain things can also be helpful because it makes kids behave in a safe way. For example, a kid with a fear of fire would avoid playing with matches.

The nature of anxieties and fears change as children grow and develop:

- Babies experience stranger anxiety, clinging to parents when confronted by people they don't recognize.
- Toddlers around 10 to 18 months experience separation anxiety, becoming emotionally distressed when one or both parents leave.
- Children ages 4 through 6 have anxiety about things that aren't based in reality such as fears of monsters and ghosts.
- Kids ages 7 through 12 often have fears that reflect real circumstances that may happen to them, such as bodily injury and natural disaster.

As a child grows, one fear may disappear or replace another. For example, a child who couldn't sleep with the light off at age 5 may enjoy a ghost story at a slumber party years later. And some fears may extend only to one particular kind of stimulus. In other words, a child may want to pet a lion at the zoo but wouldn't dream of going near the neighbor's dog.

Recognizing the Signs of Anxiety

Typical childhood fears change with age. They include fear of strangers, heights, darkness, animals, blood, insects, and being left alone. Children often learn to fear a specific object or situation after having an unpleasant experience, such as a dog [bite](#) or an accident.

Separation anxiety is common when young children are starting school, whereas adolescents may experience anxiety related to social acceptance and academic achievement.

If anxious feelings persist, they can take a toll on the child's sense of well being. The anxiety associated with social avoidance can have long-term effects. For example, a child with fear of being rejected can fail to learn important social skills, causing social isolation.

Many adults are tormented by fears that stem from childhood experiences. An adult's fear of public speaking may be the result of embarrassment in front of peers many years before. It's important for parents to recognize and identify the signs and symptoms of their children's anxieties so that fears don't get in the way of everyday life.

Some signs that a child may be anxious about something may include:

- becoming clingy, impulsive, or distracted
- nervous movements, such as temporary twitches
- problems getting to sleep and/or staying asleep longer than usual
- sweaty hands
- accelerated heart rate and breathing
- nausea
- headaches
- stomachaches

Apart from these signs, parents can usually tell when their child is feeling excessively uneasy about something. Lending a sympathetic ear is always helpful, and sometimes just talking about the fear can help the child move beyond it.

What's a Phobia?

When anxieties and fears persist, problems can arise. As much as a parent hopes the child will grow out of it, sometimes the opposite occurs, and the cause of the anxiety looms larger and becomes more prevalent. The anxiety becomes a **phobia**, or a fear that's extreme, severe, and persistent.

A phobia can be very difficult to tolerate, both for kids and those around them, especially if the anxiety-producing stimulus (whatever is causing the anxiety) is hard to avoid (e.g., thunderstorms).

"Real" phobias are one of the top reasons children are referred to mental health professionals. But the good news is that unless a child's phobia hinders his or her everyday ability to function, the child sometimes won't need treatment by a professional because, in time, the phobia will be resolved.

Focusing on Your Child's Anxieties, Fears, or Phobias

Try to answer the following questions honestly:

Is your child's fear and the behavior he or she is exhibiting typical for your child's age? If the answer to this question is yes, it's a good bet that your child's fears will resolve before they become a serious cause for concern. This isn't to say that the anxiety should be discounted or ignored; rather, it should be considered as a factor in your child's normal development.

Many children experience age-appropriate fears, such as being afraid of the dark. Most kids, with some reassurance, and perhaps a night-light, will overcome or outgrow it. However, if they continue to have trouble, or there's anxiety about other things, the intervention may have to be more intensive.

What are the symptoms of the fear, and how do they affect your child's personal, social, and academic functioning? If symptoms can be identified and considered in light of your child's everyday activities, adjustments can be made to alleviate some of the stress factors.

Does the fear seem unreasonable in relation to the reality of the situation; and could it be a sign of a more serious problem? If your child's fear seems out of proportion to the cause of the stress, this may signal the need to seek outside help, such as a counselor, psychiatrist, or psychologist.

It's a good idea for parents to look for patterns. If an isolated incident is resolved, parents shouldn't make it more significant than it is. However, if a pattern that's persistent or pervasive emerges, you should intervene. If you don't, the phobia will most likely impact your child over time.

You can contact your child's doctor and/or a mental health professional who has expertise in working with children and adolescents.

How to Help Your Child

Parents can help children develop the skills and confidence to overcome fears so that they don't evolve into phobic reactions. Here are some steps that may help guide you in helping your child deal with his or her fears and anxieties:

- Recognize that the fear is real. As trivial as a fear may seem, it feels real to your child and it's causing him or her to feel anxious and afraid. Being able to talk about fears helps - words often take some of the power out of the negative feeling. If you talk about it, it can become less powerful.
- Never belittle the fear as a way of forcing your child to overcome it. Telling your child, "Don't be ridiculous! There are no monsters in your closet!" may get your child to go to bed, but it won't make the fear go away.
- Don't cater to fears, though. If your child doesn't like dogs, don't cross the street deliberately to avoid one. This will just reinforce that dogs should be feared and avoided. Provide support and gentle care as you approach the feared object or situation with your child.
- Teach your child how to rate fear. If your child can visualize the intensity of the fear on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the strongest, he or she may be able to "see" the fear as less intense than first imagined. Younger children can think about how "full of fear" they are, with being full "up to my knees" as not so scared, "up to my stomach" as more frightened, and "up to my head" as truly petrified.

- Teach coping strategies. Try these easy-to-implement techniques. Using you as "home base," the child can venture out toward the feared object, and then return to you for safety before venturing out again. The child can also learn some positive self-statements, such as "I can do this" and "I will be OK," which your child can say to himself or herself when feeling anxious. Relaxation techniques are helpful as well, including visualization (of floating on a cloud or lying on a beach, for example) and deep breathing (imagining that the lungs are balloons and letting them slowly deflate).

The key to resolving fears and anxieties is to overcome them. Using these suggestions, you can help your child better cope with life's situations.