

# Phobias

Fears are a normal part of growing up. At specific ages, children are normally afraid of certain things. Phobias are extreme and persistent fears that make your child anxious fairly frequently and interfere with his or her usual routines. Simply talking to your child about his or her fears can help to reduce them. If phobias are causing a lot of disruption in your child's life, mental health treatment can be helpful.

## What are phobias?

All children have some fears. Certain fears seem to be normal at specific stages of your child's development. For example, babies and toddlers are commonly afraid of strangers or of being separated from their parents. Preschoolers tend to be afraid of imaginary things, like monsters. Older kids may have more realistic but unlikely fears, such as natural disasters.

When your child becomes preoccupied by a specific fear or it starts interfering with his or her usual activities, the fear becomes a phobia. In many cases, your child will respond to reassurance that he or she is safe and protected. Irrational fears usually go away after a while. More severe phobias can disrupt your child's life, leading to refusal to attend school or other problems. If this is the situation, your doctor may recommend evaluation and treatment by a mental health professional.

## What do they look like?

- Phobias are not just fears. They are fears that are greater than they should be—out of proportion to whatever is causing them. If they continue, phobias can interfere with your child's activities.
- Fear of strangers or unfamiliar situations may lead your child to become very shy, making it difficult for him or her to make friends. Sometimes, children with these *social phobias* refuse to go to school. In severe cases, children with social phobias may refuse to leave home at all. This is called *agoraphobia* and may occur with panic attacks.
- Fear of the dark or fear of being alone may interfere with sleep. Your child may refuse to go to bed or to stay in bed. These fears may be normal at certain ages. However, when they become extreme and persistent, they are phobias.
- Your child may develop irrational fears of specific things, for example, dogs, insects, heights, flying, or being in closed spaces. He or she may avoid any situation in which there is a chance of encountering the feared object.

## What causes phobias?

- It is unclear why normal childhood fears sometimes develop into phobias. They may arise from early, unpleasant experiences or may reflect an insecure attachment to parents.
- Phobias may be a reaction to a stressful situation in your family. For example, your child may become fearful around the time of a divorce or separation, after moving to a new home, or when a parent becomes ill.

## What are some possible complications of phobias?

- Phobias can make it difficult for your child to have the normal experiences and opportunities of childhood, such as making friends and trying new things. More severe phobias can interfere with school attendance and disrupt your family's life.
- Phobias are sometimes part of other problems related to anxiety, such as panic disorder.

## What puts your child at risk of phobias?

A history of anxiety in your child or family may make your child more likely to have irrational, disruptive fears.

## Can phobias be prevented?

Reassure your child that he or she is safe from harm. Avoid exposing him or her to frightening things, including scary movies or TV shows.

## How are phobias treated?

In most cases, simply continuing to reassure your child can do a lot to reduce his or her fears.

- Let your child know that he or she is safe and protected.
- Help your child find ways of dealing with the fear. For example, provide a nightlight for children who are afraid of the dark.
- Be sympathetic, and let your child know that his or her fears are normal. Especially with older children, point out when what they fear is very unlikely to happen.
- As much as possible, put limits on the extent to which fears disrupt your child's activities. For example, be understanding that your child is anxious about going to school, but don't let him or her simply stop going to school.

If your child's fears seem more severe, or if they are interfering with his or her normal activities, your doctor may recommend a visit to a child and adolescent psychiatrist or other mental health provider.

- Childhood fears and phobias often improve a lot with relatively simple treatments. They don't necessarily mean that your child has a serious mental disorder.
- Psychotherapy can help your child to understand what's causing his or her fears and to see them more realistically.
- If fears are very specific, a process called *desensitization* may be recommended. In this form of therapy, your child is gradually exposed to whatever it is he or she fears and taught ways of dealing with the fear. The goal is that, over time, your child will be better able to tolerate the feared object.

- Medications are generally not helpful for children with phobias. However, if depression or panic attacks are present, antidepressants or other medications may be a helpful part of treatment. It may take several weeks before these medications begin to take effect.



### **When should I call your office?**

Call our office if:

- Your child develops fears that interfere with his or her usual activities or cause a lot of distress.
- Your child's phobias don't seem to be getting better by talking about them or after starting treatment.
- Your child's phobias seem to be getting worse, or he or she is having panic attacks.