

Specific Phobias

A specific phobia is characterized by an **intense, irrational, persistent fear of a particular object, person, situation, or activity**. There are important differences between specific phobias and normal childhood fears. It is normal for children to have at least one specific fear, but those fears become a problem **when they interfere with daily functioning**.

- Specific phobias are common in children and fade over time
- Most phobias appear to be associated with a traumatic event or learned reaction
- A specific phobia is only problematic if the fear interferes with daily functioning

Listed below are the four most common types of specific phobias. Other types include choking, vomiting, or contracting an illness, avoidance of loud noises, avoidance of costumed characters (like clowns!), and more.

Animal:

Includes fear of dogs, snakes, spiders, etc. These are the most common kinds of specific phobias

Natural Environment:

Includes fear of heights, storms, water, etc.

Blood-Injection-Injury:

Includes fear of seeing/touching blood, receiving a shot or blood test, watching television shows that depict medical procedures or gore, etc.

Situational:

Includes airplanes, elevators, driving, going over bridges or tunnels, etc.

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What can I do at home:

- **Talk openly about fears.** Normalize the fact that everyone has scary thoughts and feelings sometimes. Let your child know that you are there to listen and support them.
- **Don't reinforce specific phobias.** Take advantages of opportunities to help your child overcome their fear! Show them ways to be brave in the midst of their feared stimulus.
- **Model positive behavior.** Children learn through watching, so it's important to model how to respond when interacting with something you or your child fear.

Effective treatments for specific phobias:

- **Exposure therapy:** focuses on changing the response to the feared object or situation. Gradual, repeated exposure to the specific phobia as well as the thoughts and feelings that accompany that experience may help to manage anxiety levels.
- **Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT):** involves exposure along with other CBT techniques to learn new ways of viewing and coping with the feared stimulus. CBT emphasizes learning and developing mastery over one's thoughts and feelings as opposed to becoming overwhelmed by them.
- **Medication:** can help reduce anxiety or panic around interacting with a specific phobia. Medications may be used in the initial treatment stages or in short term encounters when facing the phobia is inevitable, such as riding on an airplane.