



PATHWAY CLINIC

comprehensive treatment for mental health

Childhood Phobias

Most children experience some fears while growing up. Fears of the dark, monsters, death or insects are common. Usually, these fears are quick to subside and do not become severe enough to affect the child's life. Sometimes, however, they may last for an unusually long time or become progressively worse. In such cases, the fear may have escalated to what is called a phobia.

What Is a Phobia?

Phobias are generally irrational and excessive. In other words, they are not based on fact; they are more severe than is appropriate for a certain situation. Sometimes children's fears are warranted. For example, a child who has had a severe allergic reaction to a bee sting may become extremely afraid of bees. This fear is not irrational. It becomes a phobia when the child refuses to go outside at recess for fear a bee may be present or when even a picture of a bee causes anxiety and fear. It is important to note that in some cases, a phobia is based on a real event that the child may not have disclosed; for example, a child who is afraid to go to school because he is being severely ridiculed by peers.

What can you do for a child with a phobia?

The first rule of thumb is to remember that the child's fear, no matter how unrealistic, feels very real. Attempts to explain, minimize, or simply dismiss the fear may be damaging. On the other hand, focusing too much on the phobia is not helpful either. Compassion and support are often the most helpful tools. Below are some guidelines that may help in dealing with a child's fears:

- These fears are authentic to children. It is important to take them seriously.
- Help the child take little steps to overcome the fear. For instance, a child who is afraid of dogs may begin by watching a movie involving dogs, looking at a puppy in a pet store and eventually petting a puppy with a trusted adult nearby.
- Reward any small steps the child takes.
- Encourage open discussion about the fear.
- Don't be afraid to seek professional assistance.

Types of Phobias Experienced by Children

Simple Phobia: A persistent fear of a specific object or situation.

Social Phobia: The fear of being embarrassed or humiliated in social situations.

School Phobia: The fear of going to school.

Seeking Professional Help

When fears persist, professional help should be considered. Recent advances in psychotherapy have resulted in the development of some very effective techniques for helping children overcome phobias. These include:

- **Exposure Therapy:** This involves having children relax while imagining they are in a phobic situation thereby breaking the link between the object and the fear
- **Modeling:** Children learn from the actions of others. Seeing a parent or friend successfully interact with a feared object can help reduce the child's fear.
- **Individual Therapy:** Sometimes talking with a therapist about the fear can help uncover where the fear stems from and how to begin alleviating it.
- **Family Therapy:** Family therapy is often very useful as parents must play an integral part in helping a child overcome a phobia. Professional guidance in the best ways to deal with the child's fear is helpful for both the child and the parents.
- **School Involvement:** In the case of school phobia, it is important to involve members of the school system in the treatment process. Their understanding is imperative to the child's progress. It is also important for the school system to realize the child is not a truant, but rather afraid of going to school.

If your child is experiencing symptoms of a phobia and you would like professional assistance, Pathway Clinic can help. Please call 608-643-3663 for more information or to make an appointment.