

# Phobias in Kids

Top Tips to Help Kids  
Beat Phobias



Lionel Hartley, PhD

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# Top Tips to Help Kids Beat Phobias

Phobias are intense fears of specific objects, situations, or people. There are a number of common phobias that affect kids, including a fear of:

- Loud noises
- Costumed characters
- Animals, insects, reptiles
- Specific situations (flying, elevators)
- The environment (fear of storms)
- Injury or blood

Many childhood fears fade overtime, but others persist or even worsen with development, causing intense distress and disruptions to day to day routines.

Because phobias are a normal part of development it can be hard to know when to seek help. Signs that indicate your child needs help overcoming their phobia include:

- Fear that is intense and disabling
- Fear that is excessive for the situation
- Your child avoids situations because of their phobia and this disrupts their daily routines or social development
- The phobia has been present for more than 6 months

If your child's phobia persists, speak to your GP about a referral to a child clinical psychologist or other qualified health professional.

## What You Can Do at Home

### Help Your Child Identify their Fears

Help your child write a list of all the things they're afraid of. Use words your child relates to. If your child denies being "afraid" of swimming but can admit that they "don't like it" use these words instead. Make a list of all the ways you could practice facing this fear. For example, if your child is afraid of swimming your list might include: standing in the shallow end, swimming in the deep end, swimming at the beach, etc.

## Help Kids Rank Their Fears via a Fear-Ladder

Help your child rank their fears from most fearful to least fearful.

The first step on your child's fear-ladder should be only mildly anxiety-provoking. Something that will make your child feel a little bit anxious but not so anxious that they think they won't be able to do it. (See Dr Hartley's Handout.)

## Choose Rewards

Facing fears can be hard and while you as a parent might be able to see the future benefits of overcoming a phobia your child will probably see things differently. Ask your child to come up with a list of rewards that would help them to feel good about climbing their ladder. Rewards might include: picking what's for dinner, going to the movies, having a friend over, special time with mum/dad, extra TV time, staying up 15 minutes later than usual, etc.

## Be Consistent With Rewards

For rewards to be effective they have to be something your child actually wants, and they have to be awarded as soon as possible after the step is completed. If the reward can't be given immediately give your child a voucher that they can "cash in".

## Match Rewards To Challenges

Rewards should reflect the degree of difficulty of the task – smaller rewards should be given for smaller steps, and larger rewards for later more challenging steps.

## Practice, Practice, Practice

Set aside at least 1-2 times per week to practice. Start with the least anxiety provoking step first, and practice this step over and over until it's almost boring. When you've practiced enough, move on to the next step and repeat. It's important that your child experiences success at each step before moving on.

## Model Bravery

If you're apprehensive, your child might misinterpret your anxiety to mean that the situation is dangerous or that you don't believe they can cope.

Being calm shows your child that you have confidence in them.

For the illogical fears which are not severe enough to be called phobias, simple explanations and reassurance will help many children gradually get over them.

## **Recognising Fear and/or Anxiety in Young Children**

- Shy, quiet, hesitant
- Difficulty trying new things
- Perfectionistic
- Preference for routine or predictability
- Difficulty with change
- Somatic Complaints
- Headaches, stomachaches
- Inflexible, rigid, things have to be “just so”
- Poor, picky eaters

## **Recognising the Anxious Child at Home**

- Temper tantrums / behavioural difficulties
- Moody, irritable
- Easily ‘fly off’ the handle
- Difficulty with sleep
- Can’t fall asleep, nightmares
- Sensitivity (emotional or sensory)
- Can be highly sensitive to criticism
- Easily moved to tears

## **Recognising the Blurred Lines**

- The distinction between normative anxiety and an anxiety disorder is a “grey area”
- How much distress does your child have compared with his/her peers?
- Check in with teachers – do they have concerns socially or academically?
- Ensure there is no bullying, learning issues, or other home / school stressors
- Think about family history – is there a strong family history for anxiety or mood disorders?