



**RESOURCES.RESULTS.RELIEF**

## Home Management Strategies for Specific Phobia

### How To Do It!

#### Step 1: Teaching your child about anxiety

This is a very important first step, as it helps children and teens understand what is happening to them when they experience anxiety. Let your child know that all the worries and physical feelings he or she is experiencing has a name: **Anxiety**. Help your child understand the **facts about anxiety**.

**Fact 1:** Anxiety is normal and adaptive, as it helps us prepare for danger.

**Fact 2:** Anxiety becomes a problem when our body tells us that there is danger when there is no real danger.

To learn how to explain this to your child, see  
[How to Talk to Your Child about Anxiety.](#)

#### Step 2: Teaching your child about phobias

- We all have fears, and that is normal.
- A phobia, however, is a very strong fearful reaction to a thing, place, or situation that does not really make sense when the actual risks are considered. For example, if a dog growls at you once, it would not make sense to never go near any dog *ever again*.
- Phobias can stop people from doing important things. Talk with your child about how the phobia is interfering with his or her life, and how it is affecting the family. What is the phobia stopping your child from doing?

Here's a dialogue of a parent explaining the meaning of phobia:

**Parent:** So, now that we know more about anxiety, I want to tell you what a phobia is.

**Child:** Is it like anxiety? I think I've heard of it before.

**Parent:** Yes, that's right. Remember when we were talking about anxiety, and I said that we all have fears?

**Child:** Yeah. Even you and dad!

**Parent:** Right. Many of these fears make sense. For example, it is normal to be afraid of a dog if it is growling at you! A phobia is when someone has a really strong fear of something that isn't really dangerous. Sometimes people have a phobia of elevators, heights, or spiders.

**Child:** Ugh, I don't like spiders. But they don't freak me out **THAT** much.

**Parent:** When Aunt Susan was your age, she had a phobia of dogs. She would cry, scream, or freeze when she saw a dog, or even just hear a dog bark!

**Child:** But some dogs are dangerous and have rabies.

**Parent:** Yes, some are, but most of them are harmless, especially in our neighborhood. Aunt Susan was afraid of very friendly dogs, or even sleeping dogs. She couldn't even look at pictures of dogs. That is a

*phobia – when you are afraid of something even when it isn't really dangerous. It can make life really hard! Aunt Susan had to walk four extra blocks to school just to stay away from the old dog down the block. She wouldn't even go to birthday parties when there was a dog there, even if the dog was locked in the basement.*

**Child:** *That is kinda like me and balloons. I freak out. I don't want to go near them at all!*

### Step 3: Building Your Child's Toolbox

You can help by giving your child some tools to manage anxiety. The tools will help your child to accomplish the **most important step** – facing his or her fears. For phobias, tools in the toolbox include:

#### Tool #1: Learning to Relax.

Two strategies can be particularly helpful to teach your child how to relax:

**1. Calm Breathing:** This is a strategy that your child can use to calm down quickly. Explain to your child that we tend to breathe faster when we are anxious. This can make us feel dizzy and lightheaded, which can make us even more anxious. Calm breathing involves taking slow, regular breaths through your nose. For more information, see [Teaching Your Child Calm Breathing](#).

**2. Muscle Relaxation:** Another helpful strategy is to help your child learn to relax his or her body. Have your child tense various muscles and then relax them. Then, have your child use "the flop," which involves imagining that he or she is a rag doll and relaxing the whole body at once. For more information, see [How to Do Progressive Muscle Relaxation](#).

If your child has a phobia of receiving injections, or seeing blood or injuries, and is afraid of fainting, see

[How to Teach Your Child Not to Faint at The Sight of Blood or Needles.](#)

#### Tool #2: STOP Plan or Realistic Thinking

Often, the anxious thoughts that children and teens have about their phobia are unrealistic or very unlikely; however, when they are very anxious, it is difficult for them to recognize this. For example, a child who has experienced a house fire may believe that a book of matches might start another house fire, even if they are just sitting in the kitchen drawer. Even though this is unrealistic, the child screams if mom or dad brings matches into the house. One way to help your child examine his or her thoughts, and decide whether the worries are unrealistic, is to use the STOP Plan. The STOP Plan can help children see their anxiety and unhelpful thoughts, and to develop new thoughts. For older children and teens, you might want to help your child challenge unrealistic or anxious thoughts.

For a young child, see [Healthy Thinking for Young Children](#). For teens, see [Realistic Thinking for Teens](#).

### Tool # 3: Facing Fears

The most important step in helping your child overcome a phobia is to gradually face the feared object or situation. Remember, these steps are gradual, and created together with your child. For more strategies and tips on conducting similar exercises with your child, see [Helping your Child to Face Fears: Exposure](#).

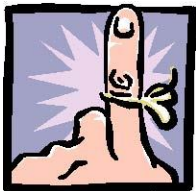
#### How to do these exercises:

Facing fears in a graduated and consistent manner (i.e., exposure) is the most effective way of reducing fears over the long term. It is important to prepare your child for the fact that he or she **will** feel anxious while doing this, but **that is good!** When fighting back anxiety, it is normal to feel a little anxious, especially in the beginning. It is also very important to **praise** (e.g., "great job!") and **reward** (e.g., small inexpensive items, extra TV time, making a favorite dinner) your child for any successes, as well as any attempts at trying to face his or her fears. After all, it is hard work to face anxiety!

#### Step 4: Building on Bravery

Your child's progress comes from hard work. If you see that your child is doing better then you both deserve a lot of credit! Learning to overcome anxiety is like exercise – your child needs to "keep in shape" and practice his or her skills regularly. Make them a habit. This is true even after your child is feeling better and has reached his or her goals.

Don't be discouraged if your child has lapses and returns to his or her old behaviors every once in a while, especially during stressful times or transitions (for example, going back to school, or moving). This is normal, and just means that one or two tools in the toolbox need to be practiced again. Remember, coping with anxiety is a lifelong process.



#### Helpful Tips:

- **Model it!** Model how to face fears, and provide support and encouragement; however, be careful not to push your child too far too fast. Let your child work at his or her own pace.
- **Don't Fight It!** Encourage your child to try and remain calm, rather than try and fight the feelings of anxiety.
- **Track Progress!** Occasionally, remind your child what he or she was not able to do before learning how to cope with anxiety and face fears. It can be very encouraging for your child to see how far he or she has come! This is why it is a good idea to create a chart that records all of your child's successes!