

Specific Phobias: A Teacher's Guide Transcript

Heather: Common phobias to children and young people include phobias of crowds, of large groups of individuals, they might be phobic of certain situations or places, or of certain items.

Asha: Phobias that are common in children and young people may be related to phobias around being in a social situation, might be travelling on public transport, might be public speaking, for example. Or there might be specific phobias around about food, for example. Those are the general phobias that we come across.

Heather: Behaviors that might be observed by professionals or teachers within the school environment in children who have got specific phobias could be things such as avoidance, distress, upsets or tearfulness.

Asha: So it might be they don't want to be in the classroom environment, they don't want to engage in a particular subject, for example P.E., that requires to be in group situations and engage in group activities. Also, the young person might become acutely distressed, so they might exhibit physical or verbal aggression, for example, that's when they're really acutely distressed. But also what might occur is the opposite, where the young person becomes quite isolated and withdrawn. And these are the children that generally seem to fade away in education—because they're not creating any difficulties, they might be getting on with some of their work, but actually they're quite isolated and withdrawn.

Some of the strategies that we use to support children with specific phobias is strategies related to cognitive behavior therapy and behavior approaches. So we get the young person to look at the thoughts that they're experiencing, and we look at whether there are any thought patterns in terms of do they overgeneralise, are they making a mountain out of a molehill-type situation? And then we get them to really explore what is it that's so bad about that specific thing that's causing them high levels of anxiety. And why is it that it's so bad about it, and what would happen if they were exposed to that situation?

We would gradually expose that young person to the phobia that they're particularly avoiding. And we do it in a graded way, so initially we do the work around the strategies and their thoughts, what happens to their body sensations when they feel like they're going to be exposed to that situation.

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And then we might start, for example, if somebody has got a fear of social situations and therefore won't enter the classroom, we might get the young person to watch a video about what happens in a classroom when a teacher would come in to explain the layout, the classroom, the seating, what's expected, and the timetable throughout the day, for example. Then we might get the young person to stand outside the door of the classroom. Then we might get them to go into it, but only spend five minutes in the classroom with everybody else. So we're gradually increasing their exposure to that situation.

Heather: Another technique that can be helpful for supporting children and young people with phobias or fears is using a fear challenging ladder and by strategically placing on the ladder the level of worry about different things, and working through them by starting with the least-feared worry. It's also helpful to provide the young person with tools and strategies that they can use to manage their fear or phobia. Praise and small awards are also important.

Asha: It's unfair to put them in a situation without giving them any tools or anything that they can draw upon when they do start to feel anxious. It's important we do the preparation work before we expose them to that.