

Now fear this

What's the difference between fears and phobias? BY LISA EVANS



Sandra Charlson (name changed by request) first realized that her nine-year-old son Cole was terrified of speaking in public when he entered Grade 1. He got a nosebleed every time he had to speak in front of the class. Presentations weren't the only problem. He was in a car accident when he was five and now has a phobia about congested traffic. He feels anxious when he thinks the driver is going too fast.

All children have fears, but Cole's nosebleeds and inability to sit calmly in the car were a cause of concern to Sandra. "We all have fears," says counsellor Andriana Mantas. However, fears of strangers or a particularly vicious-looking dog are spontaneous and reactive. Phobias, on the other hand, last several months or years, and even into adulthood. "What distinguishes a fear from a phobia is the frequency, intensity and duration of the fearful response."

WHY DO WE HAVE PHOBIAS?

While phobias can sometimes be explained by a traumatic experience, such as Cole's fear of traffic and fast-moving cars, others are simply a result of a child's natural temperament.

The good news is that phobias can dissipate as children get older; but if left untreated, they may begin to interfere with daily life, preventing the person from participating in activities where they may have to confront their fears.

HOW CAN YOU HELP?

Andriana says it's important to acknowledge children's fears, but she encourages parents not to over-coddle. "Parents can unwittingly reinforce a phobia by avoiding the scary situation or showering their child with affection when they get upset." While hiding from the fear may relieve anxiety in the short term, it can also create lifelong habits of avoidance. "What we want to do is acknowledge the fear without giving it too much power," says Andriana.

Tom Ollendick, psychologist and director of the Child Study Center at Virginia Tech who studies fears and phobias in children, says the best way to help kids overcome their phobias is through graduated exposure. "We encourage parents to expose their children to the things that they're afraid of in a careful, graduated and supportive kind of way."

A child with a phobia of dogs, for example, may benefit from looking at pictures of dogs or going to a pet store to look at dogs behind a protective glass barrier before coming face to face with one. Tom encourages parents to participate in the process of graduated exposure, guiding their child toward the object of their fear and providing support. However, he warns that children should never be forced to confront what frightens them, as this can accentuate the phobic response.

Sandra has implemented strategies of

WHAT CHILDREN FEAR THE MOST

→ A 2009 Virginia Tech study ranked the top four phobias among school aged children as:

- the dark
 - storms
 - dogs
 - costumes or characters
- "These represent 75 percent of childhood phobias," says psychologist Tom Ollendick, who led the study.

→ A phobia of dogs may come from a traumatizing run-in with a vicious canine, but Tom says fears of the dark, storms and costumed characters are likely a result of children's lower cognitive abilities. "As children are developing, they're not able yet to fully understand the characteristics of storms or of the dark, so they represent scary things." Not knowing who's inside a costume, or what causes creaking sounds at night can be downright terrifying, but learning how shadows work, where thunder comes from and who's behind a mask can be the first step towards overcoming the phobia and explains why these phobias dissipate with age.

graduated exposure while helping her son overcome his phobia of speaking in public by asking him to write out what he wants to say and having him practise it at home in front of her. Cole has also enrolled in activities such as Cub Scouts, where he has to do mini presentations in front of a small number of people to earn badges. "Being prepared has helped tremendously," she says.

Andriana says relaxation exercises can also help calm phobic reactions. "Breathing deeply will bring the needed oxygen back into the body and stop the heart from racing," she says. Breathing also helps to focus on the present, rather than what might happen, which is at the heart of a phobia.

WHEN SHOULD YOU SEEK HELP?

While fears and phobias are a normal part of childhood development, seek professional help if the phobia begins to impede your child's daily life. Increased clinginess, falling grades and a loss of social connections can signal that a fear is taking over. "If a fear of dogs means you child can't go out at recess because the neighbour's dog can be heard from the schoolyard, it's time to call in the experts," says Andriana. ○

Is your child anxious or afraid?

These feelings are common. Learn more at ParentsCanada.com/phobias