

# New study and treatment available for kids facing phobias

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Researchers at Macquarie University's Centre for Emotional Health are investigating an exciting new treatment for childhood anxiety. This treatment could drastically change how psychologists give therapy to anxious kids.

“Anxiety disorders are among the most common problems experienced by kids, with up to five per cent of young people experiencing an anxiety disorder at any one time”, says Simon Byrne who is leading the study.

“Very often the anxiety or fear is related to an animal. Two of the most common animal phobias in kids are a fear of dogs and a fear of spiders”, he said.

“These phobias can cause considerable distress to a [child](#) as they grow up. Phobias can also cause problems for parents who may have to constantly reassure their child when they are anxious or upset. For example, a child who is fearful of dogs may be too afraid to walk down a street alone where they once saw a dog. Or a child who is very frightened of spiders may be too scared to go to sleep at night in their bedroom.”

Byrne said effective treatment for phobias involves helping a child gradually face what they are frightened of in a process called graded exposure therapy. For example, a child who is dog phobic may be encouraged to calmly and gently approach a live dog in the presence of a therapist until they are no longer fearful. However, some kids do not improve with exposure therapy alone, so new and more effective treatments need to be developed to help kids get better and stay well,” Byrne said.

A new medication called D-Cycloserine (DCS) is now being trialed in conjunction with [exposure therapy](#) for treating phobic kids. “DCS has shown to improve the chances of a faster and complete recovery when given just before an exposure session. The medication is very safe, just like taking a dose of antibiotic. This new discovery could drastically change how anxiety disorders in young people are treated”, Byrne said.

“During the exposure, the child is learning that they no longer need to be frightened of what they once feared. DCS is believed to improve this process by more effectively storing this new “non-fearful” learning in memory. By strengthening this new “non-fearful learning”, the child is less likely to become frightened the next time they see a dog or spider,” Byrne said. “This is one of the first studies in the world to trial DCS for

treating anxious kids”, Byrne said.

This particular treatment takes place at Macquarie’s University’s Emotional Health Clinic. The treatment is quick, effective and free. Criteria for the study include: The young person needs to be aged between 8–14 years. They should be so fearful of spiders or dogs that it is interfering with their life. The young person has to want to get help for their [phobia](#).

**More information:** More information can also be found on the Clinic’s website at [www.emotionalhealthclinic.com...dex.cfm?page\\_id=1403](http://www.emotionalhealthclinic.com...dex.cfm?page_id=1403)

Provided by Macquarie University

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