

New treatment for childhood phobias

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Australia's leading support, treatment and research facility for anxiety and emotional disorders, the Centre for Emotional Health at Macquarie University, is trialing a new treatment for childhood dog and spider phobias. This treatment approach could dramatically improve how psychologists treat anxiety disorders.

The trial combines the antibiotic D-Cycloserine (DCS), a safe medicine used by doctors to fight infections, with exposure therapy in the treatment of phobic children. DCS is believed to help the children remember not to be scared of something they previously feared. This study is one of the first in the world to trial DCS for this purpose.

Exposure therapy used in the trial involves helping the child to calmly "get used" to being around real dogs or spiders. This allows the child to gradually "face their fear" and learn new non-fearful associations with the phobic object. While the therapy is widely regarded as an effective treatment by psychologists, there are many instances where it is not successful.

Macquarie University researcher Simon Byrne, who leads the research trial said: "Some children will not improve with exposure therapy alone, so new and more effective treatments need to be developed to help anxious kids get better."

"DCS has been shown to improve the chances of a faster and complete recovery when given just before an exposure session. The medication is very safe, as it is like taking a single low dose of an antibiotic," he said.

Phobias are a common form of childhood anxiety. A fear of spiders and dogs are two of the most common childhood phobias. In severe cases, these phobias can cause significant interference in a child's life. For example, a child who is dog phobic may be unable to play with friends who have pet dogs. This could impact on their development of friendships or on their social skills more generally.

Byrne also outlined that phobias can heavily impact families and home life.

"A child who is fearful of dogs, for example, may be too afraid to walk down a street where they once saw a dog. Or a child who is very frightened of spiders may be unable to fall asleep in their bedroom at night," he said.

The new trial is being conducted at Macquarie's University's Centre for Emotional Health. Researchers at the University are currently calling for 20 additional children with spider and dog phobias to participate in the study.

Parents who have a child aged between six and 14 years who is fearful of spiders or dogs are invited to join the study. Treatment is fast, effective and free for participants.

Provided by Macquarie University

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