

UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL PHOBIA

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Case Study Example of Social Phobia

Walt, who is now 15, has always been a bit of a loner, his parents reported. He has had a few friends, but never felt really close with any peers. In new situations, he seems shy and withdrawn. His parents stand by helplessly after having tried everything they know to encourage him to be more outgoing. Walt required a great deal of time to get comfortable in therapy, but he eventually described his intense anxiety in most social situations. Like many people, Walt feels nervous when he has to speak in front of a crowd, though his fears often give way to panic. Walt usually does not complete his projects or speeches because he would rather say he didn't do the work than try to explain his panic to his teacher. He has been labeled a "slacker" by fellow students and an "under-achiever" by teachers. Walt is sure that everyone will just be waiting for him to mess up his speech and that he will never live it down. He is distressed by his distorted beliefs in the cafeteria, too, where he is sure that he will do something stupid to make everyone will laugh at him. School has become so stressful to Walt that some days he stays in bed and tells his mother he has a stomach ache. Walt is falling into a vicious cycle of intense anxiety and avoidance from which it will be difficult to escape.

What is Social Phobia?

Social Phobia, also known as Social Anxiety Disorder, involves a serious and longstanding fear of social or performance situations in which the child has to face unfamiliar people or feels judged by others. Examples may include attending a birthday party, performing in a piano recital, or answering questions orally in class. Many children with social phobia feel seriously distressed while writing, speaking, or eating in public. Children with this problem may be able to interact reasonably well with familiar people. The anxiety must occur with unfamiliar peers, not just in interactions with unfamiliar adults. Many young children are shy with adults, but probably would not be described as having social phobia.

Children with Social Phobia will be upset in almost every situation involving social interactions with strangers, not just every once in awhile. The distress may be so severe that the child has a Panic Attack (rapid heart rate, shortness of breath, fear of impending doom). Children may also cry, have tantrums, freeze up, or retreat away from contact with unfamiliar people.

Though adults will often recognize that their own phobic reaction is excessive or irrational, children may not have this understanding. A phobia is defined as a condition in which an identifiable situation or object results in a) excessive, unreasonable, and irrational fear, and b) an intense desire to avoid the object of the child's fears. The avoidance subsequently results in significant impairment in the child's normal routines, school performance, social activities, or relationships. Children may miss excessive amounts of school, may miss out on normal social experiences such as parties, or may receive poor grades due to their inability to perform in front of classmates.

Who is at risk for Social Phobia?

Social phobia is probably under-diagnosed in children and adolescents. Teachers may not pick up on the student's anxiety because these children are often quiet and generally do not cause problems. Whereas up to 13.3% of adults have been identified as having social phobia, as few as 1% of children and adolescents have been found to have the diagnosis in current research. Most researchers believe that parents and teachers are not as aware of children's anxiety, and children are not good at reporting it themselves, when compared with the ability of adults to report their own social anxiety.

Social Phobia may develop in particular children for a variety of reasons. First, some children are predisposed to anxiety by their temperament and natural emotional reactions. Parents often notice from very early ages that the personality differences between siblings were apparent even from infancy. Some children from birth are more emotionally reactive, easily upset, and cautious around strangers. Scientists studying these intensely reactive infants have found that many grow up to become socially anxious youths.

In my experience, anxious children often have at least one parent who is also anxious. The anxious parent often imparts this anxiety on his or her child by "hovering" and over-protecting the child. Children of anxious parents often grow up thinking the world and strangers are scary, that you are safe only if you cling to parents, and that the child does not have the skills to handle challenges independently. These same children, often intensely anxious themselves, dominate their parents by demanding constant attention.

Many parents became what Cline and Fay (<http://www.loveandlogic.com/>) call "helicopter parents" – those who hover – for understandable reasons. Many times, I have met families in which the child suffered some illness (e.g., asthma, heart defects, etc.) or the family endured some catastrophe (e.g., robbery, house fire) and as a result the parents adopted a vigilant parenting style with their children. Unfortunately, the helicopter parents did not know when to stop hovering as the child grew more capable and mature. Ironically, the parents' efforts to protect their children can make some children less capable of defending themselves.

Modeling is a powerful teaching tool for children, also. Though parents may not hover over their children, some parents model a fearful and self-critical method of handling the world's challenges. If a child who is already predisposed to anxiety frequently witnesses his or her parent being anxious, the child's fears are likely to be worsened.

Though anxiety and fears are fairly common in both boys and girls, some studies suggest that girls experience social phobia more than do boys.

What Other Things Tend to Go Along with Social Phobia?

Children with Social Phobia are quite likely to have some other form of anxiety as well. They may have Separation Anxiety, a Simple Phobia, or Generalized Anxiety

Disorder. Children with Social Phobia often show up with physical complaints such as headaches and stomach aches. It is often associated with depression. As children with Social Phobia progress through adolescence, research shows they are significantly at risk for substance abuse.

How is Social Phobia Identified?

Understanding a child’s social anxiety begins with interviewing parents. Parents can inform a clinician about the situations in which the child feels anxious, how long the distress has been going on, how much the distress is interfering with the child’s (and family’s) life, and what have they already tried to do to deal with the child’s fears. Since anxiety tends to run in families, the mental health expert will need to ask whether anyone else in the family deals with excessive anxiety.

Teachers can also provide helpful information by describing the child’s social skills, emotional state in school and with peers, and anxious reactions if they are observed. Many clinicians will ask parents and teachers to complete rating forms such as the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) to determine if the child’s anxiety is worse than that of most children his or her age.

Child interviews are also quite helpful in identifying social anxiety. After establishing rapport and comfort with the clinician, children can identify the situations in which they feel the most anxious. Children can also begin to describe in diagnostic interviews the distorted thoughts they may be having. Many times, the child will be asked to fill out his or her own rating form such as the Reynolds Child Manifest Anxiety Scale or the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory. Children are often asked to complete a measure of depression (e.g., the Child Depression Inventory) since depression often goes along with Social Phobia. Clinician’s will inquire about other factors which often relate to Social Phobia such as family interactions, stressful life experiences, and substance abuse.

How is Social Phobia Treated?

Cognitive-Behavioral psychotherapy has been found to be quite helpful in treating social phobia. A cognitive-behavioral therapist will help the child challenge negative beliefs. The therapist and child will identify the child’s unique pattern of distorted beliefs (see below). Then these negative thoughts, which I refer to as “Drag-Me-Downs,” can be challenged, found to be unreasonable, and replaced with more positive thoughts, which I call “Pick-Me-Ups.” Some examples are:

Drag-Me-Downs	Pick-Me-Ups
“Everyone’s going to laugh, and I won’t be able to show my face again” (<i>catastrophizing</i>)	“It’s not that big a deal if I slip up a little. Almost everybody made some kind of mistake.”
“I’m getting nervous; I must be messing up!” (<i>Emotional reasoning</i>)	“It’s normal to be nervous; just relax.”

“It’s my fault my group got a bad grade.” (<i>Personalization</i>)	“I know what I could have done better, but I think others could have done better, too.”
“Why did I say that? I sound so stupid!” (<i>Over-critical</i>)	“Life isn’t a test; it’s just practice. Move on.”

Children and adolescents also need to learn how to communicate more effectively about their emotions. Often, their apprehension about social events and distorted beliefs don’t seem so bad after they been expressed out loud. They also benefit a great deal from relaxation techniques which include breathing exercises, progressive muscle relaxation, and positive imagery.

Exposure to the feared situation can also be a powerful tool in therapy. In therapy, a hierarchy of fearful situations is developed so that one can begin with situations that elicit a little anxiety. The individual moves up the hierarchy to more fearful situations as his or her anxiety decreases.

Group therapy is often useful for people with social phobia because participants can encourage each other and can try out new behaviors within the safety of the group. The group format provides a good opportunity to learn and practice social skills.

What Can Parents Do to Help in the Treatment of Social Phobia?

Parents are in an ideal position to help the socially anxious youth. Overcoming social phobia requires one to face and conquer anxiety over real-life situations. Parents are the most likely to be present and the most likely to be compassionate and encouraging for the anxious child. Parents should learn how to “read” their child’s early warning signs of anxiety and panic. Look for tell-tale signs such as licking the lips, fidgeting, blushing, looking away, becoming irritable, etc. Help your child interpret these signs by quietly stating that you understand his or her feelings. Encourage your child to use positive coping statements, relaxation techniques, or specific social skills in these situations. Remember, your child cannot be rushed, however. Often, the most helpful thing you can do is listen and allow space for your child to solve his or her own problems.

Avoid rescuing your child like the “helicopter parent.” Your child must know that you understand his or her feelings, but you believe your child can do what it takes to cope with the fear. You may enable your child to experience success, however, by structuring social situations to your child’s advantage. Set up play dates for your child, but remember that the difficulty and stress of the social encounter can be measured across the following factors:

- The number of children involved;
- The length of time involved;
- The degree of structure to the activities;
- The amount of adult supervision offered;
- The personality of the children involved.

Consider inviting just one new child at a time to your home where you can facilitate if things get awkward. Some parents make the mistake of stretching out the play date because “they’re getting along so well.” Inevitably, someone gets tired and grumpy resulting in conflict. Then, the play date ends on a sour note rather than ending early and letting both children look forward to a future get-together.

As a parent of an anxious child, you should also look at the way you handle your own anxiety. Do you fret over how others might be judging you? Do you worry that you said the wrong thing? I always tell parents who answer “yes” to these sort of questions that they have a golden opportunity to be good models for their children. By catching your own anxious moments – even panic – you can show your child how you change “drag-me-down” thoughts into “pick-me-ups,” relax, and go on about your day. The anxious parent should not hang the mantle of guilt around his or her neck, but should instead seize the opportunity break the chain of anxiety in the family!

Where Can I Get More Information About Social Phobia on the Web?

<http://shykids.com/>

<http://www.ncpamd.com/anxiety.htm>

Other Resources?

Books for children:

Cain, B. (2000). *I Don't Know Why . . . I Guess I'm Shy : A story about taming imaginary fears*

Schaefer, C.E. (1993). *Cat's Got Your Tongue? A Story for Children Afraid to Speak*

Book for parents:

Beidel , D.C. & Turner, S.M. (1997). *Shy Children, Phobic Adults : Nature and Treatment of Social phobia*