

Emma Bryant

Professor Broaddus

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Where do Phobias Stem From in Young Children?

You are walking back home after a long day of class when all of a sudden, you hear a sound that automatically catches your attention. Your heart begins to beat faster and faster, your palms begin to sweat, and your breathing rate begins to increase. This is an example of a common bodily response that humans have in response to a fearful stimulus. As humans, we all feel these emotions because it is in our biology. Fear becomes irrational when the body begins to react in this way to normal everyday stimuli. An irrational fear is referred to as a phobia and are found amongst many different age ranges but are most prevalent in children. Juvenile phobias are considered to be anxiety disorders linked to fears that may seem irrational.

Much research has been done on childhood fears and most researchers can agree that phobia cause a lot of stress on the body of a child when left untreated. Something that is not quite agreed on is how phobias develop. This has been a question that researchers have been exploring for many years, but a collaborative answer is yet to be agreed on.

Dr. Lichtenstein believes that phobias are caused in one of three ways that are affected by the environment around the patient. The first of the three ways that he believes phobias are formed is through classical conditioning (Lichtenstein 927). Classical conditioning is when a stimulus is repeatedly paired with a negative stimulus which causes trauma. The second was through modeling methods (Lichtenstein 927). This is when a child learns to fear something as a result of observation. Lastly there is information exposure which is when there is always a negative connotation with the feared stimulus resulting in the stimulus forming into a phobia

(Lichtenstein 927). With these three elements, fears can develop into phobias. Lichtenstein is a very firm believer that phobias and fears are direct results from the environment. The article states: “also found profound shared environmental influences on phobias as well as fears.” (931). Phobias form because of the environment and the direct stimuli that a child interacts with daily.

Unlike Lichtenstein, researcher Orion Keifer believes that fear from phobias are simply biological (Keifer 390). Lichtenstein focuses more on the environment in which the child inhabits whereas the study written by Keifer focuses primarily on the Amygdala in the brain and how it is responsible for fear learning and processing. The Amygdala is a region of the brain that oversees controlling fear (389). Researchers decided that it has this function because it controls heart rate and other stress responses stated earlier (Keifer 391). Because of this, Keifer believes that the Amygdala plays the largest role in fear and phobia conditioning. Keifer states “a conceptualization of the brain circuitry underlying fear learning and expression has emerged, and a preponderance of evidence suggests a pivotal role for the amygdala” (389). This belief stems from the study he conducted where their test subjects were participating in fear conditioning and the area of the brain that houses the Amygdala would light up in response to fear (Keifer 393). Because of this, researchers from this article believe that the brain controls what causes fear in children because of the large role the brain plays on bodily responses. Phobias would form because the brain is wired to fear the specific object so, the amygdala is programmed to fear for example clowns or the dark because it is in one’s biology.

Research done by Dominic Cheng similarly suggests that fear learning and phobia development has a biological factor (1187). Dr. Cheng researches Pavlovian fear conditioning and how the Amygdala aids in the responses we have with fear (1187). They studied patients

with damage and trauma to the brain tissue around the amygdala. They discovered that even with minor damage to the Amygdala, it still aided in physiological fear responses in the presence of a feared stimulus. As a result of the research conducted by Cheng, he states: “These results further implicate the involvement of the amygdala in the autonomic expression of conditional fear and suggest that studies that view the human amygdala as a functionally homogenous structure” (Cheng 1194). In other terms, the amygdala plays the largest role in a human’s reaction to feeling fear. A big difference between the two researchers however was that Cheng does attribute some fear responses to the environment (Cheng 1194). The researcher says that the amygdala will give a more intense response if the environment is presenting the stimulus more intensely. Cheng would argue that the environment and fear responses in the brain would work simultaneously to develop a phobia.

In the research done by Öst Lars-Göran and Lisa Clefberg Liberman, they do not specifically research the cause of phobias, but they do study the relationships between anxiety disorders and fear disorders in children and their parents. The researchers took forty nine to twelve year olds with phobias or other fear disorders and conducted surveys on their parents (Clefberg 599). After their research was completed, they discovered that 65.5% of mothers expressed fear in front of their children (Clefberg 601). Their study showed that there was no correlation between fear in children and fear in their parents however they think it still does play a role in a child’s phobia development (Clefberg 604). Though their research did not give the researchers the results they had predicted, they do state: “the results in the present study may still point to the importance of addressing parental anxiety when treating children” (604). Though the fear in both parties do not directly correlate, there is still a relation between fear in adults and their children. As a result, Öst Lars-Göran and Lisa Clefberg Liberman would argue that the

development of phobias come from the environment and from who they interact with in one's day to day life.

Because every child is different with different experiences, every child will experience the development of a phobia in different ways. Because there is a wide variety and range of phobias, it is hard to pinpoint exactly where each phobia develops in a young child. To give a more specific example, Researcher Ian Kneebone did a study on a thirteen-year-old boy suffering from an extreme phobia of balloons (Kneebone 51). Like other researchers, Kneebone believes that all phobias are anxiety based and that the body of the child goes through many physiological pressures in the presence of the feared stimulus. Unlike the other researchers however, Kneebone very openly made it known that he does not believe that there is any one source for fear and that he does not believe any two children are the same. When discussing the circumstance of his client who suffers from a balloon phobia, he states "at age three he had become frightened and wanted to retreat to the family car when a twelve year old family friend burst some balloons being used to make water bombs. Tom also recalled himself "many years ago" trying to blow up a balloon and it bursting in his face." (52). As a result of this case study, he concluded that phobias develop because of one's life experiences as well as from the environment. Kneebone feels so strongly about this simply because there is not much research done on the fear of balloons and where it stems from (Kneebone 53). In order to get a better understanding of where Kneebone's client's fear of balloons came from, the researchers had to ask the client a long list of questions to find the root of the problem. The researcher asked questions like "What was your first memory of fearing balloons?", "Do you feel this same fear around other loud noises?", and "How do you feel in the presents of balloons?", to tailor a therapy program that is best suited for the child (Kneebone 52). This case study shows specifically how the fear of balloons comes to

be. Unfortunately, other phobias are not this easy to detect and analyze because many other factors can play a role in their development.

The research done by many different researchers proves that phobias can form because of many possibilities. It could be from the environment one grows up from, because your brain is simply wired to fear that stimulus, or because both the environment and the brain work together causing a phobia to develop. In the future, more research on phobias rather than just fear itself need to be done to get a better and more universal decision on how phobias form. In the case study with the balloon phobia, it is easier to decide where and when the phobia arose because it is a tangible object. This is not so easy to decipher when the fear is inanimate like for example the fear of the dark or thunderstorms. Researchers can also agree that children have different experiences and different backgrounds so they will experience fear in different ways. As a result, one specific way cannot be decided on how a phobia is formed because there are too many other factors that contribute to phobia or fear conditioning. Unfortunately, researchers cannot study the brain of every child to determine a single cause of phobias.

Works Cited

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