

Shyness and children

A shy child is anxious or inhibited in unfamiliar situations or when interacting with others. A shy child is most likely to be nervously constrained if they feel they are 'on show', such as when meeting someone new or having to speak in front of others. A shy child is much more comfortable to watch the action from the sidelines rather than join in.

Most children feel shy from time to time but the lives of some are severely curtailed by their shyness. Children who suffer from extreme shyness may grow out of it as they mature or they may grow up to be shy adults. Parents can help their children to overcome mild shyness. In severe cases, professional help may be advisable.

Complications of shyness

Constant and severe shyness can reduce the quality of a child's life in many ways, including:

- Reduced opportunities to develop or practise social skills
- Fewer friends
- Reduced participation in fun and rewarding activities that require interaction with others, such as sport, dance, drama or music
- Increased feelings of loneliness, unimportance and reduced self-esteem
- Reduced ability to reach full potential because of their fear of being judged
- High anxiety levels
- Embarrassing physical effects such as blushing, stammering and trembling.

Shyness has positive aspects too

Shy behaviour is associated with a number of positive behaviours including:

- Doing well at school
- Behaving and not getting into trouble
- Listening attentively to others
- Being easy to look after.

Possible causes of shyness

Some of the possible causes of shyness, often working in combination, may include:

- **Genetics** – aspects of personality can be decided, at least in part, by the individual's inherited genetic makeup.
- **Personality** – emotionally sensitive and easily intimidated babies are more likely to grow up to be shy children.
- **Learned behaviour** – children learn by imitating their most influential role models: their parents. Shy parents may 'teach' shyness to their children by example.
- **Family relationships** – children who don't feel securely attached to their parents or who have experienced inconsistent care-giving, may be anxious and prone to shy behaviour. Overprotective parents may teach their children to be inhibited and afraid, especially of new situations.
- **Lack of social interaction** – children who have been isolated from others for the first few years of their lives may not have the social skills that enable easy interaction with unfamiliar people.
- **Harsh criticism** – children who are teased or bullied by significant people in their lives (parents, siblings and other close family members or friends) may tend towards shyness.

- **Fear of failure** – children who have been pushed too many times beyond their capabilities (and then made to feel bad when they didn't 'measure up') may have a fear of failure that presents itself as shyness.

The vicious cycle

If a child acts shy in a social situation, they may berate themselves for their behaviour afterwards. This self-reproach can make them more self-aware and self-judgemental and actually increase the likelihood of the child behaving shyly in future. As time goes on, their confidence and self-esteem may start to falter. The less confident a child feels, the more likely they are to behave in a shy way.

Parental attitudes are crucial

Parents are very influential in their children's lives – probably much more than parents realise. Suggestions include:

- Be careful not to label your child as 'shy'. Children (and adults) tend to live up to the labels others give them.
- Don't let other people label your child as shy either.
- Never criticise or mock your child when they are shy. Be supportive, empathic and understanding.
- Encourage your child to talk about the reasons for their shyness – what are they afraid of?
- Tell your child about times in your life when you have been shy and how you overcame it. Since young children often see their parents as perfect, admitting to your own shyness can make your child feel better and reduce their overall anxiety.
- Be outgoing yourself. Model confident behaviour and lead by example.

Strategies for the parent

It is possible for the parent to encourage their child to be more outgoing. Strategies depend on the individual child and circumstances but can include:

- Share personal coping strategies you've learned over the years on overcoming shyness. Practice these strategies with your child.
- Tell your child about the many advantages of not being shy. Offer examples from your own life.
- Encourage outgoing behaviour. Praise your child when they handle an unfamiliar situation or meet a new person without resorting to shyness.
- Try goal-setting with your child. Aim for small, incremental steps and praise them for their progress. For example, saying 'hello' to another child may be a big first step.
- Deliberately take your child into new situations. Aim for small changes in behaviour first and gradually build up. For example, reward a child if they greet someone who is new to them. Be supportive.
- Make sure your child is allowed to excel in what they do best. Praise them for skills they have mastered.

Professional help

If your child's shyness is especially debilitating, you may like to consider professional help from a counsellor or psychologist. Treatment options include:

- Stress management
- Relaxation strategies
- Counselling sessions
- Social skills training.

Where to get help

- Your doctor (for a referral to a specialist service)
- Psychologist
- Parent Line Tel. 132 289

- Kids Help Line Tel. 1800 551 800

Things to remember

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- Most children feel shy from time to time but the lives of some are curtailed by their shyness.
- In severe cases, professional help may be advisable.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

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