

## SHYNESS IN CHILDREN

adapted from

Porter, L. (2006). *Children are people too*, (4<sup>th</sup> ed.) Adelaide, East Street.



Shy children are 'slow to warm up' in new settings and may refuse to engage or speak with others when first greeted. Whereas disruptive behaviour comes about because children are not monitoring their actions enough, shy children are monitoring themselves *too much*. They worry too much about the impression they are creating. Shyness leads to inhibited and awkward social behaviour, particularly in the presence of new acquaintances (Young et al. 1999).

Shyness comes in two forms.

- The first is the normal self-consciousness of the three-year-old. This form of shyness is benign, particularly when it wanes with increased familiarity with the setting and when young children's social engagement improves over time (Ladd & Burgess 1999; Spinrad et al. 2004).
- The second is the excessive shyness of older children (aged four or over) who show reduced positive emotions and too much control of their expression of emotion, particularly anger (Spinrad et al. 2004). These children maintain minimal involvement with others by remaining on the periphery of groups, which allows them to avoid the frustration and anger occasioned by conflicts with others. Because they do not inflame conflicts, they tend to be well liked by peers (Spinrad et al. 2004).

Even when the shyness is normal, shy children lack access to peer support and to the intimacy of friendships. As a result, if the pattern persists, they tend to feel insecure and lonely and experience low self-esteem (Chen et al. 2000). Although not everyone has to be outgoing, shyness can be very painful and limiting to children. Therefore, if they are aged four or over, it will be wise to help them to overcome their shyness and to support their social engagement.

### Improve children's self-esteem

Shyness is a fear of being negatively evaluated by others (Greco & Morris 2001). Therefore, it can be worth telling children (while realising this yourself) that what other people think of us is none of our business. You will need to give substance to this message by acknowledging rather than praising children, avoiding judging them. In this way, they will learn to form their own self-assessments, rather than being reliant on other people's opinions of them. (See the paper on *Praise* on this website.)

### **Do not teach shyness**

Shyness can begin innocently enough during toddlerhood when many young children naturally become self-conscious. Nevertheless, do not prescribe or prolong this stage by naming it to the child: 'Ooh, have you gone all shy?'. This might encourage children to think it is 'cute'.

### **Normalise shyness**

Tell children that we all feel uncertain in groups of strangers: what they are feeling is normal. This removes their worry about being shy, and thus halves the problem.

### **Expect appropriate social behaviour**

Children's acceptance within the peer group improves when their social assertiveness improves (Haselager et al. 2002). When adults express understanding of the children's anxieties but support them to be sociable despite these, the children manage to overcome their inhibitions (Shamir-Essakow et al. 2004).

Therefore, guide them to practise social skills. Expect them to greet people, but not necessarily when everyone is watching them. We often put young children under the glare of a social spotlight, rather like a trapped rabbit. So give them a few minutes until people are paying attention to something else, and then invite them to say 'hello' to individuals. In this way, shyness does not become an excuse for poor social skills.

### **Encourage assertive behaviour**

Sometimes girls in particular have learned that being sweet and helpless is the way for females to navigate the world. Even when they have assertive mothers, some have gleaned this message from the many ditsy female characters in TV sitcoms and elsewhere. To overcome this misperception, it can be very effective simply to tell girls this that being shy and cute will not cut it for the modern woman in the modern world.

### **Give children appropriate experience of control**

Children who have been given many opportunities to make their own decisions, exercise autonomy, and judge their own achievements for themselves will feel empowered to exercise self-control, in which case you can just remind them to take charge of their shy impulses as well.

### **Make children responsible for a solution**

Talk with children who manifest shyness about being boss of the shy feelings that sometimes overwhelm them. Just as other fears are a product of their imagination, shyness is too. They can control how they think.

### **Teach them to act as *if* they are not shy**

Explain that most people feel nervous in company, but they pretend not to. As it happens, no one can tell whether someone is *pretending* to feel confident, or actually feels that way. Next, invite the children to pretend that they feel confident. Within a short time, being engaged outside of themselves will distract them from their feelings, and the shyness will have disappeared. In the meantime, you can enjoy sharing the 'secret': that others cannot tell whether they are pretending, or in fact not feeling shy at all.

### **Highlight previous successes**

Instead of focusing on instances when the children act shyly, comment on those times when the children were socially involved and ask them what they thought or did at the time that helped them to act less shyly. What does this say about them?

### **Teach children to think in adaptive ways**

Shyness is actually a thought, not a feeling. The resulting behaviour is caused by inaccurate thinking (termed 'catastrophising') – perhaps about what would happen if they made a social blunder. Therefore, teach children to question this inaccurate thinking. They may be imagining, for example, that they 'can't cope' with talking to other people, when in fact their feelings aren't fatal and they will survive them. The sun will still rise tomorrow.

### **Teach accurate self-evaluations**

In general, shy children do not have social skill deficits, although many *believe* that they do and that they are less socially competent than is the case (Cartwright-Hatton et al. 2003). Therefore, ensure that your feedback offers information that highlights the social skills that the children use and invites their own evaluations, for example: 'How did you get the other children to let you play?...What did you do that helped them to say 'Yes' when you asked them?'.

### **Have fun**

If nothing else has worked, you could prescribe the shy behaviour – for example by telling children not to say 'Hello' when visitors arrive, because the adults would get such a fright that they would faint. This exaggerates how silly the shyness is, making it obvious that nothing dreadful would happen if they overcame it.

### **Selective mutism**

If the behaviour becomes so extreme that the children do not talk to anyone outside of home, this is termed selective mutism. See the paper on that topic on this website for suggestions of how to respond.

## FURTHER READING

Porter, L. (2006). *Children are people too: A parent's guide to young children's behaviour*. (4th ed.) Adelaide, SA: East Street Publications.

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