



PEN Notes: Fact Sheet #31

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Shyness in Children



Almost all children are shy at one time or another. It is perfectly normal for a child to be shy around an unfamiliar person or in a new situation. There are lots of cases when shyness is developmentally appropriate; however, shyness can become a problem if a child repeatedly tries to avoid social situations.

While some shyness is normal, excessive shyness can cause problems for children because they may have more difficulty making friends, communicating with others, and expressing their opinions and emotions. Other children may also misinterpret a child's shyness as being mean or unfriendly.

What causes shyness?

All children are shy sometimes, but some children display more shyness than others. There are likely many different factors that contribute to shyness in a child. Some of these factors may include:

- **Temperament.** *Temperament* refers to a child's style of behavior and is evident at birth. Researchers have identified 9 traits of temperament. Depending on their unique combination of temperament traits, some children may be naturally more inclined to shyness. The 9 traits are:
 - Activity level--how physically active your child is
 - Regularity—how well your child sticks to routines in eating, sleeping, and toileting
 - Approach/withdrawal—how your child responds to new situations and environments
 - Adaptability—how readily your child adapts to changes
 - Sensitivity—how easily your child is bothered by things like falls, loud noises, textures, food tastes, etc.
 - Mood—whether your child displays negative or positive behaviors more often
 - Persistence/attention span—how easily your child becomes frustrated or “gives up” if a task is challenging
 - Distractibility—how quickly your child becomes distracted from tasks
 - Intensity--the amount of energy your child uses in displaying his or her negative or positive behavior
- **Shy parents.** Children may model the shy behavior of the adults around them.
- **New situations.** Children may withdraw as a way to cope in overwhelming situations.
- **Inconsistent parenting.** If children are not sure what to expect, they may not feel secure enough to assert themselves.

How can I help my child overcome his or her shyness?

Whether or not your child has a “shy” temperament, there are many things parents can do to help their children develop the skills to participate successfully in social situations. Here are seven strategies parents can use to help their children overcome shyness:

- **Expose your child to a variety of people and social situations at a young age.** This will help your child get “used to” new experiences and will give them opportunities to practice their social skills. Enrolling your child in different play groups and other social activities will also prevent them from becoming socially isolated.
- **Model non-shy behaviors.** Children often learn by watching, and if they see their parents being shy, they are more likely to be shy themselves. Modeling healthy expression of feelings and social skills, like introducing yourself to others, can help your child to learn these same skills.
- **Avoid labeling your child a “shy” child.** If a child is frequently referred to as “shy,” she may start to define herself in this way and behave accordingly. Instead of saying, “Oh, she’s just shy,” try saying something like, “sometimes it takes her a minute to get used to new people. She will feel like talking when she gets used to you.” This prevents the child from classifying herself as shy and opens the door for her to interact once she feels more comfortable.
- **Empower your child by teaching him independence and responsibility.** Shy children often become dependent on their parents and other significant people, making them reluctant to take risks. Try giving your child chores and responsibilities that are challenging, but doable, and provide opportunities for him to make decisions. By encouraging him to do so, you are empowering him, developing his self-esteem, and reducing his dependency.
- **Use social communication skills to role play.** Only after hours of practice does a performer feel comfortable taking the stage in front of audience. For a child, interacting in social settings may be much the same way. Parents can help children practice their social skills by role-playing different social scenarios. A simple way to start is by practicing simple conversation skills. Ask your child some simple questions about herself and encourage her to do the same to you. You can then get into more specific situations, such as how to join in with other students during recess.
- **Don’t allow children to isolate themselves.** Because social situations may be uncomfortable for shy children, they may have a tendency to withdraw. Help your child stay connected socially by keeping her involved in activities and play situations.
- **Don’t speak for your child.** Speaking in behalf of shy children reinforces shy behavior and steals opportunities for them to interact. Most children will “speak up” when they have a chance, and it is important for them to learn to speak for themselves.

With your help, even the shyest child can develop the skills he or she needs to have happy and fulfilling social experiences.



Sources: *PTA Parent*, January 2010.
Shyness: Protective Armor or Social Barrier?
Available at <http://www.pta.org/3779.htm#1>

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