

22 EFFECTIVE TIPS TO HELP YOUR CHILD OVERCOME SHYNESS

UNDERSTANDING YOUR SHY CHILD

Most preschoolers are shy at times; **it's a natural part of human development.** But, as many teachers have experienced, some children exhibit shy behavior not just occasionally, but consistently. For these children, everyday interactions with peers and adults can seem almost impossible. This level of shyness can create a barrier to a child's social development and overall enjoyment at school. So when should teachers give that shy child a boost, and how can they do it without creating further anxiety?



WHAT IS SHYNESS?

In social psychology, **shyness** (also called **diffidence**) is the feeling of apprehension, lack of comfort, or awkwardness experienced when a person is in proximity to, approaching, or being approached by other people, especially in new situations or with unfamiliar people. Shyness may come from genetic traits, the environment in which a person is raised and personal experiences. There are many

degrees of shyness. Stronger forms are usually referred to as social anxiety or social phobia. Shyness may merely be a personality trait or can occur at certain stages of development in children. Shyness has also a strong cultural dimension.

Shyness is a normal response to what a child perceives as a scary or overwhelming situation. Shyness helps the child withdraw from the experience long enough to gain a sense of control and figure out how to best approach the situation. Usually, shyness diminishes as children grow older and gain more exposure to a variety of situations and people. Eventually, most children become more comfortable handling new experiences, but those with extreme shyness take much longer to warm up.

Shyness involves anxiety and behavioral inhibition in social situations (Leary, 1986). It occurs most frequently in situations that are novel or suggest evaluation of the person or situations where the person is conspicuous or others are intrusive (Buss, 1986; Crozier, 2001). Although all children may experience shyness sometimes, some children experience shyness to a debilitating degree. This article is about those children.

Young shy children often show an apparent eagerness to observe others combined with a reluctance to speak to or join the others (Asendorpf, 1993). For example, shy children may remain silent around unfamiliar others, even when spoken to. Shy children may refuse to enter a new setting such as a classroom without being accompanied by a parent. Shy children may refuse to participate in athletic or dance activities, they may look only at the ground when around unfamiliar individuals, and they may go to great lengths to avoid calling attention to themselves ("*Don't whistle, mom; people will look at us*").

Shy children want to interact with unfamiliar others but don't because of their fear. A different problem exists when a child simply prefers to be alone (Asendorpf, 1993). These loner children, who are rare, show little or no interest in observing others and little or no excitement when approached by others.

Shyness in children can be challenging to address because it is not a single feeling, but a mixture of emotions. Fear, tension, interest, and apprehension are all at work in a shy preschooler. **At age 4 or 5, children develop the first glimpses of self-conscious shyness, or the fear of possible embarrassment.** This type of shyness stays with us into adulthood and, for most people, peaks in early adolescence.

WHAT DOES SHYNESS LOOK LIKE?

How does a teacher know when a child's shyness is interfering with his or her social development? Shyness in children takes many forms, but very shy preschoolers exhibit some combination of the following behaviors:

- a. They seldom speak voluntarily.
- b. They do not respond when spoken to by a teacher or classmate.
- c. They follow directions but do not respond verbally to them.

- d. When they do speak, it is often in a very soft and quiet voice.
- e. They turn away when spoken to and make little or no eye contact.
- f. They often look at the ground around unfamiliar people.
- g. They watch but do not join in play with other children.
- h. They are last to volunteer and line up for activities.
- i. They look tense, distracted, or worried in unfamiliar situations.
- j. They may refuse to enter a new setting without a familiar adult with them.

WHAT CAUSES SHYNESS

The causes of shyness have not been demonstrated adequately to justify any firm statements on the issue. However, shyness experts identify as possible causes are:

- a. genes predisposing a person to shyness,
- b. a less than firm attachment bond between parent and child,
- c. poor acquisition of social skills, or
- d. parents, siblings, or others harshly and frequently teasing or criticizing a child (Asendorpf, 1993; Sanson, Pedlam, Cann, Prior, & Oberklaid, 1996).

ORIGINS OF SHYNESS

The initial causes of shyness vary. Scientists have located some genetic data that supports the hypothesis that shyness is at least partially genetic. However, there is also evidence that the environment in which a person is raised can affect his or her shyness. This includes child abuse, particularly emotional abuse such as ridicule. Shyness can originate after a person has experienced a physical anxiety reaction; at other times, shyness seems to develop first and then later causes physical symptoms of anxiety. Shyness differs from social anxiety, which is a broader, often depression-related psychological condition including the experience of fear, apprehension or worrying about being evaluated by others in social situations to the extent of inducing panic.

GENETICS AND HEREDITY OF SHYNESS

The genetics of shyness is a relatively small area of research that has been receiving an even smaller amount of attention, although papers on the biological bases of shyness date back to 1988. **Some research has indicated that shyness and aggression** are related—through long and short forms of the gene DRD4, though considerably more research on this is needed. Further, it has been suggested that shyness and social phobia (the distinction between the two is becoming ever more blurred) are related to obsessive-compulsive disorder. As with other studies of behavioral genetics, the study of shyness is complicated by the number of genes involved in, and the confusion in defining, the phenotype. Naming the phenotype – and translation of terms between genetics and psychology — also causes problems. In some research, "behavioral inhibition" is studied, in others anxiety or social inhibition is. One solution to this problem is to study the genetics of underlying traits, such as "anxious temperament."

Several genetic links to shyness are current areas of research. One is the serotonin transporter promoter region polymorphism (5-HTTLPR), the long form of which has been shown to be modestly correlated with shyness in grade school children. Previous studies had shown a connection between this form of the gene and both obsessive-compulsive disorder and autism. Mouse models have also been used, to derive genes suitable for further study in humans; one such gene, the glutamic acid decarboxylase gene (which encodes an enzyme that functions in GABA synthesis), has so far been shown to have some association with behavioral inhibition.

Another gene, the dopamine D4 receptor gene (DRD4) exon III polymorphism, had been the subject of studies in both shyness and aggression, and is currently the subject of studies on the "novelty seeking" trait. A 1996 study of anxiety-related traits (shyness being one of these) remarked that, "Although twin studies have indicated that individual variation in measures of anxiety-related personality traits is 40-60% heritable, none of the relevant genes has yet been identified," and that "10 to 15 genes might be predicted to be involved" in the anxiety trait. Progress has been made since then, especially in identifying other potential genes involved in personality traits, but there has been little progress made towards confirming these relationships. The long version of the 5-HTT gene-linked polymorphic region (5-HTTLPR) is now postulated to be correlated with shyness, but in the 1996 study, the short version was shown to be related to anxiety-based traits. This confusion and contradiction does not oppose the genetic basis of personality traits, but does emphasize the amount of research there is still to be done before the bases of even one or two of these characteristics can be identified.

Technology has helped to pinpoint changes in socially anxious brains. Using MRI scans, Dr. Murray Stein, of the University of California, San Diego, found that when people with the disorder are shown pictures of angry faces, their amygdala—the brain's fear center—lights up with more activity than it does in people without the condition. Now Stein is looking deeper to see if the amygdala itself is overreacting or if the problem starts even earlier in the processing of fear.

SHYNESS AS SYMPTOM OF MERCURY POISONING

Excessive shyness, embarrassment, self consciousness and timidity, social-phobia and lack of self-confidence are also components of **erethism**, which is a symptom complex that appears in cases of mercury poisoning. Mercury poisoning was common among hat makers in England in the 18th and 19th centuries, who used mercury to stabilize wool into felt fabric.

SHYNESS AS PATHOLOGY

Shyness as a psychiatric illness made its debut as "social phobia" in DSM-III in 1980, but was then described as rare. By 1994, however, when DSM-IV was published, it had become "social anxiety disorder" and was now said to be extremely common. This process has been adverted to as a case study of "disease-mongering" in psychiatry. One drug company product manager has been quoted as saying, "**Every marketer's dream is to find an unidentified or unknown**

market and develop it. That's what we were able to do with social anxiety disorder". On the other hand, the prevalence of social anxiety disorder could easily be underestimated or ignored because many people who fear and avoid social situations would find going to a doctor's office and asking for help extremely difficult. In a recent article by Hope, Jenny (2012) "shyness in a child could be classed as mental illness", the author mentions that "back in 1940 the census of the United States included just one category for mental disorder. By 1917 the American Psychiatric Association recognized 59, rising to 129 in 1959, 227 in 1980, and 347 in the last revision". He continues by saying "**there is a real danger that shyness will become social phobia, bookish kids labelled as Asperger's and so on.**" Peter Kinderman, head of the Institute of Psychology, University of Liverpool, said: **'It will exacerbate problems that result from trying to fit a medical, diagnostic, system to problems that just don't fit nicely into those boxes.**

TRIGGERS, TRAITS AND MISPERCEPTION OF SHYNESS

Shyness is most likely to occur during unfamiliar situations, though in severe cases it may hinder an individual in his or her most familiar situations and relationships as well. Admitting feelings may become difficult for the individual. Shy people avoid the objects of their apprehension in order to keep from feeling uncomfortable and inept; thus, the situations remain unfamiliar and the shyness perpetuates itself. **Shyness may fade with time;** e.g., a child who is shy towards strangers may eventually lose this trait when older and become more socially adept. This often occurs by adolescence or young adulthood (generally around the age of 13). **In some cases, though, it may become an integrated, lifelong character trait.** Humans experience shyness to different degrees and in different areas. For example, an actor may be loud and bold on stage, but shy in an interview. In addition, shyness may manifest when one is in the company of certain people and completely disappear when with others— one may be outgoing with friends and family, but experience love-shyness toward potential partners, even if strangers are generally not an obstacle.

The condition of true shyness may simply involve the discomfort of difficulty in knowing what to say in social situations, or may include crippling physical manifestations of uneasiness. Shyness usually involves a combination of both symptoms, and may be quite devastating for the sufferer, in many cases leading them to feel that they are boring, or exhibit bizarre behavior in an attempt to create interest, alienating them further. Behavioral traits in social situations such as smiling, easily producing suitable conversational topics, assuming a relaxed posture and making good eye contact, which come spontaneously for the average person, may not be second nature for a shy person. Such people might only affect such traits by great difficulty, or they may even be impossible to display.

Shyness is considered to be a neutral personality trait by people who are not shy, but a very negative trait by those who are shy themselves. In fact, those who are shy *are* actually perceived more negatively because of the way they act towards others. Shy individuals are often distant during conversations, which may cause others to create poor impressions of them, simply adding to their shyness in social

situations. Other times people who are not shy may be too up-front, aggressive, or critical towards shy people in an attempt "to get them out of their shell." This may actually make a shy person feel worse, as it can draw attention to them (making them more self-conscious and uncomfortable) or cause them to think there is something very wrong with themselves. The result is that shy person could become even shyer in social situations.

WHAT'S GOOD ABOUT SHYNESS

Shy children tend to engage in significantly less social misbehavior than other children (Sanson et al., 1996). This may occur because shy children care so much about what others think of them.

WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF SHYNESS?

While shyness does have some positive aspects—for instance, shy children rarely misbehave and *tend to be able to think for themselves*—the negative effects can cause practical and emotional problems for preschoolers. Very shy children can be perceived as unfriendly by their peers, experience fewer close relationships, and have fewer opportunities to practice their developing social skills. Shyness may even restrict a child's learning and prevent a preschooler from enjoying his time at school each day. As shy children mature, they tend to be lonely, have low self esteem, and become anxious teens.

WHAT'S BAD ABOUT SHYNESS

Shyness experts vary in their views about whether childhood shyness leads to mental health problems later. However, the practical and emotional problems caused by shyness are apparent. As a practical matter, shy children obtain less practice of social skills and develop fewer friends. They tend to avoid activities, such as sports, drama, and debate that would put them in the limelight. Shy children tend to be perceived as shy, unfriendly, and untalented, and they tend to feel lonely and have low self-esteem (Jones & Carpenter, 1986) and a higher than average level of gastrointestinal problems (Chung & Evans, 2000). Shy children tend to become anxious teens (Prior, Smart, Sanson, & Oberklaid, 2000). Shy adults tend to have smaller social networks and to feel less satisfied than others with their social support networks (Jones & Carpenter, 1986). I have known shy college students who never graduate because they fear taking a required public speaking class.

Many shy individuals think of their shyness as a significant problem that hinders them in myriad ways (Zimbardo, 1986). Fortunately, some individuals act less shy as they become older (Zimbardo, 1986). However, even these individuals may regret their prior shyness, thinking sadly of the social opportunities they missed.

COMPLICATIONS OF SHYNESS

The term *shyness* may be implemented as a lay blanket-term for a family of related and partially overlapping afflictions, including timidity (apprehension in meeting new people), bashfulness and diffidence (reluctance in asserting oneself), apprehension and anticipation (general fear of potential interaction), or intimidation (relating to the object of fear rather than one's low confidence). Apparent shyness, as perceived by others, may simply be the manifestation of reservation or introversion, character traits which cause an individual to voluntarily avoid excessive social contact or be terse in communication, but are not motivated or accompanied by discomfort, apprehension, or lack of confidence.

Rather, according to Bernardo J. Carducci, director of the Shyness Research Institute, **introverts choose to avoid social situations because they derive no reward from them, or may find surplus sensory input overwhelming.** Conversely, shy people may fear such situations and feel that they "should" avoid them. Shy people tend to perceive their own shyness as a negative trait, and many people are uneasy with shyness in others, especially in cultures which value individuality and taking charge. This generally poor reception of shyness may be misinterpreted by the suffering individual as aversion related to his or her personality, rather than simply to his or her shyness. Both conditions can lead to a compounding of a shy individual's low self-confidence.

In cultures that value outspokenness and overt confidence, shyness can be perceived as weakness. To an unsympathetic observer, a shy individual may be mistaken as cold, distant, arrogant or aloof, which can be frustrating for the shy individual. However, ***in other cultures, shy people may be perceived as being thoughtful, intelligent, as being good listeners, and as being more likely to think before they speak.*** Furthermore, boldness, the opposite of shyness, may cause its own problems, such as impertinence or inappropriate behavior.

In the book "*Shyness: How Normal Behavior Became a Sickness*" (2008), Christopher Lane raises some important questions. The author mentions he had seen the child of prosperous parents, who was a problem at home and school. By the age of 13 years he had eight diagnoses and nine mental health professionals involved in his care and education. His family doctor, however, felt that the real problem was that the boy was lucky if he saw his parents for more than 1 hour each week, and was sceptical that throwing therapists, diagnoses, and stimulant medication at him was going to help the concern. "How will children like this grow up? And what does it mean to think that your behavior is not your own responsibility, but is because of your brain being wired differently than the rest of your class? Might these children come to believe that they are indeed different—set apart and endlessly in need of support and treatment even as they enter adulthood?" ***Lane goes further in expressing his concern in regards to pharmaceutical companies pushing for more and more abnormal behaviors to become classified as disorders for the purpose of making profit.***

Being shy can have its advantages as well, according to Thomas Benton in his article "Shyness and Academe", published in May 2004. **The author says that because shy people "have a tendency toward self-criticism, they are often**

high achievers, and not just in solitary activities like research and writing. Perhaps even more than the drive toward independent achievement, shy people long to make connections to others, often through altruistic behavior. Although academic hiring committees seem to want faculty members who are "dynamic" rather than self-contained, I believe that shy teachers add an important element to the mix of faculty personalities."

WHAT PARENTS AND TEACHERS CAN DO TO HELP CHILDREN OVERCOME SHYNESS

There are many strategies that can be used to help children overcome shyness. Some strategies may be more effective with some children than with others. Some children may benefit substantially from regular application of a few of the strategies listed below. Other children may need many more strategies applied. I suggest trying as many strategies as possible for at least a month and continuing with those that seem promising with a particular child. Many of the strategies are worth continuing indefinitely because they are just principles of good parenting.

Sensing the difficulties associated with shyness, teachers instinctively seek to coax shy children "out of their shells" and urge them to become more involved with the people and events that surround them. To encourage a child to become more outgoing, **teachers should be careful to not interpret a child's shyness as willfulness or spite, which may lead to punishment.** Instead, teachers should approach the process the same way they would any other developmental process, such as learning to read or sharing. Pairing the following strategies with patience, warmth, and kindness can go a long way toward giving a shy child the boost in confidence he or she needs to become more outgoing in the classroom.

1. Get to know the whole child.

Create a relationship with the child and get to know his or her strengths, weaknesses, thoughts, skills, fears, and interests. Knowing the child as a whole person and not just as "shy" creates opportunities for the teacher to customize learning opportunities, interventions, and conversations. Make time to talk with the child each day.

2. Tell the children about times when you acted bashful.

Once shy children start feeling bad about being shy, they may enter a downward spiral of becoming less and less confident and having lower and lower self-esteem. Parents can help counter this unfortunate effect of shyness by disclosing the times when they acted shy themselves (Zimbardo, 1981, p. 166). Because children often view parents as powerful, god-like figures, the children will tend to feel better about their own shy behavior. If the parents then talk about how they became more outgoing (e.g., by setting a goal of acting more outgoing and pursuing it), the children will have a powerful model to follow. The beauty of using personal coping anecdotes to lead children is that there is not much for the children to resist. No one is telling them to do anything. The parents are just describing what they did that worked.

3. Show empathy when the children feel afraid to interact.

One way to help children begin to control their fear of certain social situations is to show empathy when they feel afraid to interact with others. So, if a child refuses out of shyness to go out on a field for soccer practice, a parent might say,

"I get the sense you feel worried [self-conscious, shy, afraid] about going out there. I feel worried sometimes too - when I'm not sure what to do and other people are watching me."

By showing empathy, a parent helps the child feel understood and accepted and also helps the child identify and talk about his or her emotions and start searching for a way to control them. See Rogers (1980, p. 156).

4. Avoid labeling children as "shy."

When talking with others, parents sometimes say in front of a child that he or she is shy. Big mistake! When adults label a child as "shy," they are doing two things.

First, they are stripping the child of the many other qualities that she possesses and allowing the label to dictate the child's personality.

Second, labeling the child as "shy" encourages the child to view herself that way.

Children who are told that they are shy tend to start thinking of themselves as shy and then fulfill the role, without making any effort to change. Wise parents never hang a negative label on their children. See Wicks-Nelson & Israel (1997, p. 98) regarding the risks of labeling.

When confronted with a new situation, a child who has internalized the label of "shy" might assume, "I'm shy, so I can't do that." Instead of labeling, try to describe the child's behavior. For example, "*Regina needs some time to get used to new situations,*" or, "*Sam is a thinker. He likes to observe what is happening around him.*" **Children need to see themselves as capable of being outgoing in order to become more outgoing.**

Because shy behavior is so obvious in children, other children and adults often comment on it, saying something like, "Oh, she's shy." How do parents best handle statements by others that the child "is shy"? Try disagreeing in a good-natured way (with a smile) and offering a non-labeling alternative explanation such as that the child sometimes takes a while to warm up.

What do parents say then when their child fails out of shyness to respond to a question from someone else? There are many options. One is to prompt the child to speak. If that fails, just go on with the conversation.

5. Teach social skills.

Children who are shy may benefit from explicit instruction on social skills. Teach children specific social skills, such as how to meet new people, greet others, initiate conversations, join in play, make eye contact, and be good listeners. To teach and practice these skills, role-play or use puppets to act out different situations. Give

children specific prompts and phrases to use, such as "Hi, my name is Maria," and "Can I play, too?"

6. Set a model of outgoing behavior.

Children learn a great deal through observing the behavior of parents and others (Bandura, 1984). In fact, count on children to do more what a parent does than what a parent suggests. Parents who never invite anyone over to the house, who never take phone calls, and who never speak to strangers may tend to have shy or nonsocial children. Parents who want their children to act more outgoing are wise to monitor their own behavior and act outgoing whenever possible in front of the children. Invite friends and family members over, visit neighbors, and speak to pleasant looking strangers in grocery store lines. Most importantly, talk with children the age of your child -- join them in their games.

If your child won't speak or join in, don't worry - you're setting a model that shows that acting outgoing is something you do with kids and that the kids usually respond well. You're also showing your child how to interact with others. If your child becomes agitated at your behavior (because of embarrassment), show empathy and end the interaction in a socially skilled way. But repeat that type of interaction again and again, gradually increasing the lengths of the interactions over a course of days or weeks.

7. Explain the benefits of being outgoing.

Children who think they will gain something from a behavior are more likely to exhibit that behavior. Explain to a shy child the good things that will come from acting more outgoing, such as making friends, having more fun, and enjoying school more. Offer a personal example of a time when you overcame your own shyness and explain how you benefited from the experience.

Children who expect to benefit from a behavior tend to engage in the behavior (Pear & Martin, 1996, p. 111). The most convincing way for parents to tell children the value of acting outgoing is by giving personal examples, e.g., "*To become a teacher I had to overcome my shyness because teaching requires a person to talk to new people almost every day.*" The parents can then explain the more immediate value to the child of outgoing behavior, such as making more friends, having more fun, and enjoying school and other social activities more.

8. Set goals for more outgoing behavior and measure progress.

A good deal of research supports the value of goal setting in improving performance of various types (Locke, 1996). The most useful goals are those that are measurable (quantifiable), challenging yet realistic, and are set with the involvement of the person whose performance (behavior) is in question. For many shy children, a realistic, challenging goal is to say at least one word to one new person every day. Other possibly appropriate goals might include speaking in front of a whole class, joining (even silently) in play with another child, or asking a teacher a question. Parents can help children see their progress by posting a chart at home that shows a star or a smile for each day the child achieved the goal. Children usually like putting up the sticker themselves.

9. Create opportunities for success.

Shy children must experience social success to believe they can act outgoing and social. The following techniques can help teachers create moments of social success for shy children:

a. Create effective peer groupings. Try pairing a shy child with an outgoing peer whom you think the child will feel comfortable with. Give the two children a specific task on which they need to work together, such as solving a puzzle or putting away materials. Refrain from forcing shy children to participate in group activities. Instead, allow for the possibility of parallel play until the child feels more comfortable joining the group. Research also suggests that pairing a shy child with an older or younger child can create positive social interactions.

b. Provide specific prompts. When shy children are working or playing with others, give them the words they need to engage socially, such as, *"Tell Denise that you would like to help too,"* and, *"Ask Frida what game she would like to play."* Another way to prompt a child is by speaking to both children in a way that encourages them to talk to one another. For example, *"Rachel, I know you like to paint. Anna is a great painter, too. Anna, tell Rachel some of the things you like to paint."*

c. Assign children their own roles. Give a shy child a task or ongoing classroom job that coincides with the child's interests and strengths and that will encourage him or her to interact with peers. As the child becomes more comfortable in the role, his sense of confidence is likely to increase.

d. Give shy children the time they need. Don't pressure or force shy children into situations with which they are not yet comfortable. Give them plenty of time to warm up to new people and situations, and offer encouraging and warm words as they do. Likewise, be patient and allow shy children plenty of time to speak or respond to questions. It may take them some time to get over their feelings of nervousness.

10. Expose the children to unfamiliar settings and people.

The more practice shy children get interacting with unfamiliar people the faster the shyness will decrease. However, the exposure will work best if it is gradual (Sarafino, 1986, p. 110). Whenever possible, let the child get used to the setting and people before you push the child to interact. Help the child develop confidence in one new setting at a time, little by little. The setting could be a favorite yogurt shop where the child gradually begins to place his or her own order. The setting could be a neighborhood playground where the child eventually asks an often seen child what his name is. The key is for the shy child to visit the setting and, if possible, certain individuals, repeatedly, gradually acting more and more outgoing.

Expose the child to as many types of settings and people as possible. Make sure to expose shy children frequently to younger children. As Zimbardo and Radl (1981) and Honig (1987) noted, some shy children show more confidence in interacting

with younger children. Also, expose shy children at home to new people who are invited over. At home is where shy children tend to feel most confident.

11. Prompt the children to interact with others.

Prompt shy children to speak, join, or interact with others whenever there is any chance that the children will do so. Specific prompts work best (Martin & Pear, 1996, p. 37), e.g., "*Tell her your name is Margaret*" or "say good-bye." If the child won't say anything to a person, try prompting the child to wave hello or good-bye. A wave is a step in the right direction. Another good strategy, which might be called triangulation, involves speaking to another child, then asking your child what he or she thinks about something relating to the conversation. For example:

Parent to unfamiliar child: "*I like your Elmo shoes.*"

Parent to own child: "*Do you like them? Don't you have a talking Elmo? What does it say?*"

Be careful not to push a shy child too hard. You could just create more resistance (Honig, 1987). Go for gradual improvement, realizing that the child will show improvement some days and not others.

12. Reward the children for outgoing behavior.

Expected rewards can serve as very powerful motivators (Bandura, 1986, p. 229).

Whenever a shy child acts outgoing, praise the child. Praise even slight improvements in outgoingness. If the child achieves a set daily goal for acting outgoing, praise the child and celebrate with some special (rare and highly desired) food, sticker, or activity. A parent could, for instance, reward Bold (behavior) With Gold (stars). Tell the children in advance what the special treat will be for acting outgoing in some specific way.

13. Praise the child's outgoing behavior in the presence of the children.

As with any emergent skill, praise shy children when they act outgoing to reinforce the skill. Offer verbal praise when a child engages in a positive social interaction. If you think the child may be embarrassed by your compliments, take the child aside and tell him how well he has done in private. Try setting specific behavior goals, such as looking at others when speaking to them. Reward children for meeting the goals you set together.

By positively commenting on the outgoing behavior of others, a parent can help a shy child come to value outgoing behavior while learning the specifics of the behavior. See Bandura (1986, pp. 284-286) regarding the principle involved, which is called "**vicarious reward**." For instance, a parent might say to her child, "*I like the way that boy came up to us and asked us our names*" or might directly compliment the other child in the presence of the shy child. The comment shows positive regard for a specific behavior that the parent's child could emulate. Do not, however, add any comment such as, "*Why can't you act like that?*"

14. Help the children practice interacting with others.

Some shy children do not know what to say in certain situations, such as when they meet a new child. Parents can help the shy children by encouraging them to

practice the social skill. One effective way to help children improve a social skill is to encourage them to rehearse (role play) it (Miltenerger, 1997, p. 236). Parents and children can act out the roles themselves or use puppets. For instance:

Puppet 1: "*What's your name?*"

Puppet 2: "Ben."

Puppet 1: "*My name is Marie. What are you doing?*"

Puppet 2: "*Making [sand] cakes.*"

Puppet 1: "*I can do that too [starts making a cake].*"

15. Pair each shy child with another child in each important setting.

A shy child who makes even one friend in a new setting will feel much more comfortable and will eventually interact more with other children. Parents and teachers can help facilitate the process of making a friend by asking two children to play together [or be friends] today and then talking with both of them about their common interests or activities. **The adult can also give the two children tasks to accomplish together, such as putting out supplies or putting a puzzle together** (Honig, 1987). Choose a willing and able child for the friend - not someone who already has a bosom buddy in the setting.

16. Utilize literature. Read books with the children about individuals who overcome shyness or fears.

Read books that feature characters who overcome their shyness. Use each story as a starting point for a larger discussion about shyness. **Shy children can benefit from reading books about children who overcome shyness or fears** (Sarafino, 1986, p. 192). When reading any of these books, a parent can have the most impact by talking with the child about the lesson of the story and how it applies to each of their lives.

The following books about shy kids are worth buying or obtaining from a library. If you have iPad, Kindle or any Android-based tablet you can buy it from Amazon.com and the ebook version will be instantly downloaded to your favorite device. For Android and iOS (iPad/iPhone) devices you need to install the free Amazon Kindle app (on iPad you can download the free app [here](#)).

Bechtold, L. (1999). ***Buster the very shy dog***. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. Buster becomes less shy when he befriends a crying girl, realizes that he has a special talent of listening, and teams up with another dog to achieve a common goal. Buy [Buster the very shy dog](#) for your child.

Cain, B. (2000). ***I don't know why ... I guess I'm shy***. Washington, D.C.: Magination Press. A story about a boy who finds new ways to respond to situations that trigger shyness. With an addendum for parents who want to help their child overcome shyness. Buy [I don't know why ... I guess I'm shy](#) for your child.

Coleman, W. L. (1983). ***Today I feel shy***. Bethany House: Minneapolis. A collection of encouraging and instructive statements written in a poetic way to help children control shyness. Buy [Today I feel shy](#) for your child.

Cooney, N. C. (1993). *Chatterbox Jamie*. New York: Putnam. A shy boy won't speak at first at nursery school. Slowly he comes out of his shell and speaks to others there. Buy [Chatterbox Jamie](#) for your child.

Hazen, B.S. (1982). *Very shy*. New York: Human Sciences Press. The story of a shy girl who follows the advice of her parents about how to act more outgoing. She eliminates self-defeating thoughts such as "If I speak I might sound dumb," she pushes herself to speak even if she feels afraid, she practices in front of a mirror, and then she speaks to a new, shy boy. Buy [Very shy](#) for your child.

Johnson, M. (1996). *Let's talk about being shy*. New York: Rosen. Explains shyness and encourages children to try to act more outgoing. Buy [Let's talk about being shy](#) for your child.

Keller, B. (1975). *Fiona's bee*. New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan. Fiona acts bashful when she moves to a new house, but she makes friends when she helps a bee. Buy [Fiona's bee](#) for your child.

Krasilovsky, P. (1970). *The shy little girl*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. A girl too shy to speak up in class or join in school games makes a friend at school and then becomes more outgoing in the classroom and on the playground. Buy [The shy little girl](#) for your child.

Levine, A. (1998). *Gretchen Groundhog, it's your day*. Toronto: Whitman. Gretchen is too shy to go out of her hole on Groundhog Day and face the crowds. When she learns that her ancestors felt afraid too but went out anyway, she musters her courage. Buy [Gretchen Groundhog, it's your day](#) for your child.

McCully, E. A. (1991). *Speak up, Blanche*. New York: HarperCollins. A shy lamb wants to become an actress, but she doesn't speak loud enough. However, she discovers a talent for painting stage sets and finally speaks up. Buy [Speak up, Blanche](#) for your child.

Schaefer, Charles. E. (1992). *Cat's got your tongue?* A story for children afraid to speak. Milwaukee: Gareth Stevens. A girl is afraid to speak at school. Her parents take her to a therapist who helps her to open up at school and make friends. Buy [Cat's got your tongue?](#) for your child.

Sibley, I. (1985). *The other Tansey*. Fitzroy, Victoria, Australia: Sugar and Snails. A timid girl makes a puppet that acts assertive. Later the girl starts acting assertive and creates a more enjoyable life for herself. Get this book for your child at <http://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/2991505>.

Skorpen, L. M. (1971). *Plenty for three*. New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan. A bashful girl declines an invitation to play with two neighbor girls. She feels lonely while they have fun. The girls invite her again, and she joins them and has fun. Buy [Plenty for three](#) for your child.

Wilmer, D. (1986). *The playground*. London: Collins. A timid boy stays near the teacher and refuses to join other children on the playground until children pull him out and involve him in their games. Buy [The playground](#) for your child.

Wood, A. (1995). *Orlando's little-while friends*. Swindon, United Kingdom: Child's Play International. A shy boy starts speaking to other children he encounters and has fun. Buy [Orlando's little-while friends](#) for your child.

Zolotow, C. (1963). *A tiger called Thomas*. New York: Lathrop, Lee & Shepard. A shy boy moves to a new home and meets people when he goes trick-or-treating. Other books have value because they show a child, creature, or adult overcoming fears: Buy [A tiger called Thomas](#) for your child.

Blegvad, L. (1985). *Anna Banana and me*. New York: Atheneum. Anna acts confident and brave, and her timid female friend becomes brave too. Buy [Anna Banana and me](#) for your child.

Cave, K., & Maland, N. (2002). *The brave little grork*. London: Hadder Headline. An easily frightened creature overcomes fears by thinking brave thoughts. Buy [The brave little grork](#) for your child.

Little, J. (1991). *Jess was the brave one*. Toronto: Penguin. A timid girl has a brave younger sister. However, when bigger kids mistreat the younger sister, the older sister boldly stands up to them. Buy [Jess was the brave one](#) for your child.

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Williams, L. (1986). *The little old woman who wasn't afraid of anything*. New York: HarperCollins. An old woman followed by a bizarre creature shows no fear and instead helps the creature become a scarecrow. Buy [Three brave women](#) for your child.

Wolstein, D. (1977). *The red lion: A tale of ancient Persia*. New York: Crowell. A young prince flees when he is asked to prove his courage by fighting the Red Lion. The prince encounters lions wherever he goes, and he learns that it is fear more than the lion that endangers him. In the end, he faces the Red Lion. Buy [The red lion: A tale of ancient Persia](#) for your child.

Louder, Lili by Gennifer Choldenko. Buy [Louder, Lili](#) for your child.

Tyler Is Shy by Susan Hood. Buy [Tyler Is Shy](#) for your child.

Say Hello, Vanessa by Marjorie Weinman Sharmat and Lillian Hoban. Buy [Say Hello, Vanessa](#) for your child.

17. Eliminate teasing of the children or reduce the impact.

Social rejection and teasing can help produce shy behavior. So, do not tease your child or allow anyone else to. If necessary, remove your child from the presence of rejecting or teasing children (Asendorpf, 1993). Also, discuss with your children the expression "*Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me*" and describe teasing you have experienced. Your self-disclosure will help the child feel less bad about being teased.

18. Teach the children to identify and to verbally express their emotions.

Shy children can best start to control their feelings of embarrassment and fear when the children identify and talk about the feelings. To help the children develop these skills, talk about your emotions in front of the children. For instance, say, "*I feel scared when you climb up there*" or "*I feel sad when I think about homeless children.*" Praise the children when they talk about their emotions. Play emotions charades or other games that help teach children to identify and express their emotions (Malouff & Schutte, 1998).

19. Communicate with parents. Coordinate your efforts with those of other relevant adults.

Team up with parents to create a plan to help the child overcome his or her shyness. Talk frequently about the strategies you're using in the classroom that are effective. Work together to set goals for the child's social development. A consistent approach between school and home can increase the results of your efforts.

Efforts to help a child become more outgoing will produce more improvement if all the caretakers and teachers of the child apply regularly the methods mentioned in this list. These other individuals, especially teachers, can make major contributions to the effort merely by praising the child for more outgoing behavior and by helping the child make friends with another child in every setting the child frequents (e.g., school, day care, the T-ball team). Teachers can also read to the students books about shy children. In enlisting the help of these individuals, realize that they may have their own ideas about how to accomplish the goal. Go along with them as much as possible, and they will likely cooperate with you.

20. Reaping the Rewards.

With understanding, warmth, and targeted strategies, teachers can help the extremely shy child develop confidence and the social skills needed to succeed in preschool and beyond. As shy children develop these skills, the rewards will be present in every daily greeting, raised hand, and enthusiastic smile.

21. Read more about shyness and learn additional strategies for parents and teachers.

For parents, the Honig (1987) article, the Sarafino (1986), Zimbardo (1999), Carducci (1999), and Rapee et al. (2000) books, and the web sites of Cohen-Posey (2002), Early Childhood Australia (2006), Gilbert (undated), Is your child shy? (Undated), Keith (2001) (through its links), Kruegger (1999), Parenting the shy child (undated), and 8 ways to help a shy child, listed in the references contain a wealth of strategies beyond those mentioned here. This two books ([*Nurturing the*](#)

[**Shy Child: Practical Help for Raising Confident and Socially Skilled Kids and Teens**](#) and [**The Shy Child: Helping Children Triumph over Shyness**](#)) is highly recommended by experts and parents I know who are successful in helping their shy child. It was written by authoritative authors who are renowned in their field of expertise. The book offers practical and easy to understand tips. I also found excellent iPad and iPhones apps (any other iOS device will do) that may help you. In this way you will be informed anywhere. Click the links now ([**Shy No More: Learn How to Talk to Anyone**](#) & [**Goodbye To Shy**](#)) and download the iOS apps.

Teachers wishing to help shy students will find especially helpful the web sites of Early Childhood Australia (2006), Davies (undated) and Malouff (2002) and the articles of Bokhorst (1995), Bullock (1993), Biemer (1983), and Evans (1992), as well as the shyness-related interventions described in the book of Cohen & Fish (1993, p. 396 et seq.). See the references at the end of this article.

22. Consult a guidance counselor, psychologist, or physician.

If you find it difficult to apply the methods contained in this set of recommendations, or if the methods don't work for your child, contact a guidance counselor at your child's school or consult a psychologist who provides counseling to children and families. To find a highly qualified psychologist, consult your pediatrician or call local universities and ask if the university itself or any psychology professors privately provide any counseling for shy children.

Psychologists may apply procedures not described in this site, such as videotaping the child speaking at school (e.g., with only a parent present) and having the child view the tape daily before going to school (Kehle, Owen, and Cressy, 1990; Pigott & Gonzales, 1987). Some physicians will prescribe a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor like Prozac for cases of severe shyness characterized as selective mutism or social anxiety disorder, but medication of children should be a last resort because of the unknowns about long-term side effects.

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