

Shyness: Helping Handout for School and Home

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INTRODUCTION

Shyness is generally characterized by fear, anxiety, wariness, and unwillingness to participate in interactions with others in situations that are novel, are uncertain, and involve the possibility of judgment from others (Evans, 2010). It is considered to be a temperamental trait (that is, a stable part of the child's personality), especially after preschool age.

Certain situations and environments at home and at school may be challenging for shy children. Shyness can be related to early academic skill difficulties that may worsen across middle childhood. Shy children are generally reluctant to ask or answer questions in the classroom and do not seek out conversations with teachers or other students. As a result, teachers tend to attribute lower intelligence to shy children (Coplan et al., 2013), and other students may have negative responses to children with shy temperaments.

When parents allow shy children to remain quiet and do not encourage children to stretch out of their comfort zones, these children may have poorer vocabulary and executive function skills, such as planning and organization (Blankson, O'Brien, Leerkes, Marcovitch, & Calkins, 2011). Similarly, parents of shy children sometimes have the tendency to protect their children from situations that may cause distress (Rubin, Cheah, & Fox, 2001). However, this parental desire eliminates opportunities for growth and maintains and reinforces feelings of anxiety and wariness in shy children. Understanding the needs of shy children can help set them up for success.

WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN SELECTING INTERVENTIONS

School and home practices that carefully consider a shy temperament can help shy children navigate challenging situations. When choosing intervention strategies, there are several individual and contextual factors to consider that may contribute to shyness or affect the interventions.

At the *individual level*, a child's age may contribute to the presentation of shyness. Shyness may be expressed in younger children as fear and hesitancy in new situations or as oppositional behaviors; shyness in older children can involve embarrassment and self-consciousness in evaluative situations (Kalutskaya, Archbell, Moritz Rudasill, & Coplan, 2015). The new environments and challenges of adolescence, such as friendships, romantic relationships, and new schools, may be especially challenging for shy youth. Many of the interventions included below can be adapted for use with adolescents, such as selecting age-appropriate rewards and praise.

Shy children are also at increased risk for mental health issues. Children with shy temperaments have a tendency to think of themselves negatively, which places them at risk for low self-esteem and symptoms of depression and anxiety (Gazelle & Ladd, 2003). Similarly, it is important to consider the differences between shyness, social anxiety, and selective mutism when considering intervention techniques. Shy children experience anxiety in novel situations and with new people, but they are generally able to warm up after they become familiar with the situation and those around them. In contrast, children with social anxiety disorder experience such a high

level of anxiety that they avoid social situations as much as possible. Children with selective mutism experience a level of anxiety that often prevents them from contributing verbally to interactions in any way within particular settings, such as school. Shyness, social anxiety, and selective mutism can co-occur, and treatment from mental health professionals is advised for children with social anxiety disorder or selective mutism. Mental health professionals should be consulted if symptoms interfere with a child's daily functioning, cause significant family distress, or require parents or teachers to significantly modify daily routines.

At the *contextual level*, children's cultural background should be considered when determining whether intervention is necessary and when selecting strategies. Collectivist cultures that value group cohesion tend to view shy behaviors as normative, whereas Western cultures that value assertiveness and individualism may consider shy behaviors more problematic (Rubin, Coplan, & Bowker, 2009). When planning interventions in schools, teachers should be mindful that some families may have views that are different from their own about shy children.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOL

Teachers can provide supports and classroom activities that may bolster the social and academic success of shy children. The following strategies may be helpful.

1. **Engage in one-on-one conversations with the student to build a trusting relationship.** Ask open-ended questions about nonacademic topics, such as family or hobbies.
2. **Avoid labeling students as shy and instead emphasize the student's uniqueness, while acknowledging that certain situations are challenging.** For example, "I know you would like to first watch the other students play on the playground, so I'll stand with you for a few minutes before you join them" (McClowry, 2014).
3. **Provide opportunities for peer supports in the classroom.** The following approaches can help shy students acclimate to interactive activities:
 - Pair shy students with a more extroverted buddy or peer helper to encourage participation in large group activities.
 - Place shy students in small groups of approximately two to five students. Some shy students may be more likely to engage in small groups, rather than with a teacher or in front of the whole class.
4. **Look for opportunities to encourage shy students to participate successfully in class.** Peers may notice shy students' reticence and try to speak for them. Discourage this behavior by calling on shy students to answer questions that you know they will be able to answer before opening up the question to the rest of the class. This practice can give them the opportunity to verbally participate in class.
5. **Praise shy students for verbal participation in class or group settings, but avoid drawing attention to them in front of others.** Instead, praise the behavior nonverbally (such as with a smile or a thumbs-up) or praise privately after the behavior. Use labeled praise, which names the specific behavior that you are praising, such as "I'm so proud of you for raising your hand," or "You did such a nice job asking your friend for a turn."
6. **Ease students into speaking situations by creating "brave challenges."** A brave challenge is a goal set by a student and teacher to participate in an activity or engage in a behavior that is difficult for the child. For example, a brave challenge might be to participate in class by volunteering to answer a question posed by the teacher. Below are recommended steps for presenting brave challenges (adapted from Gold, 2017):
 - **Establish a goal.** For example, have the child write or state: "I want to raise my hand in class and answer a question."
 - **Find a good starting point.** The final goal may be too challenging to start with. A good starting point is something that is easier for the child, such as saying "Here" when attendance is being taken.
 - **Introduce the task (and the reward system).** For example, the challenge is "I will raise my hand and say 'Here' during attendance each morning. For each day I say 'Here,' I will get one sticker. At the end of the week, if I have five stickers, then I can choose something from the prize box."
 - **Rehearse or role-play the situation.** After the child achieves the starting goal, the student

and teacher should work together to create a new challenge that will help him or her reach the final goal. An appropriate role-play might be to answer a teacher's question in front of only a few students, such as during group work. The first few tries may need additional support, such as asking a question that you rehearsed with the student to reduce the fear of giving the wrong answer.

- *Praise and reward the child's effort.* Follow through by rewarding the student with the chosen sticker or token reward system.
- *Repeat practice.* Once mastery is achieved, have the child set and work toward a new, harder goal.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HOME

Parents can support shy children's exploration of their world and encourage social interactions through building relationships, modeling desired behaviors, and providing opportunities for children to take age-appropriate risks. The following strategies may be useful.

7. ***Foster a caring relationship, in which thoughts, feelings, and fears are discussed openly.*** Use the following approaches to help your child talk to you comfortably:
 - Help your child understand that everyone has insecurities and makes mistakes.
 - Ask open-ended questions that encourage detailed responses. In this way, a shy child can practice speaking more and develop the ability to share with others.
 - Speak softly and carefully, and wait patiently for a response. A child with a shy temperament may be overwhelmed by loud conversations or too many questions and comments. It also may take a shy child some extra time to respond when spoken to.
8. ***Provide opportunities for successful interactions with others.*** Be understanding of your child's reluctance to participate in social situations and allow the child time to adjust to new situations. Give your child opportunities to practice by setting up nonthreatening events with others. Perhaps plan a one-on-one playdate with a more extroverted peer who can evoke conversation from the shy child.

9. ***Avoid rescuing your child in situations that cause discomfort.*** Resist the urge to speak on your child's behalf. It is a natural instinct for parents to want to find solutions for their child's discomfort. However, jumping to the rescue, such as joining a conversation when a shy child is having difficulty, impedes the child's growth. Minimize attention to anxious or avoidant behaviors, if possible, such as whining, clinging, or tantrums.
10. ***Model social and exploratory behaviors for your child.*** For example, demonstrate the appropriate way to introduce yourself to a new person, or try out a new activity with your child. Through modeling, children may learn to imitate the desired social and exploratory behaviors.
11. ***Stretch your child's levels of exploration and comfort.*** Use scaffolding to help your child try new situations and interactions, such as the following (McClowry, 2003):
 - Rehearse situations, role-play possible scenarios that might occur together, and positively reinforce desired behaviors.
 - As your child engages in the novel situation or interaction, maintain close proximity when appropriate, monitor how the child is doing, and continue to provide nonverbal reinforcement (such as with a smile, nod, or thumbs-up).
12. ***Set goals for your child to work on.*** Focus on specific goals, such as making eye contact and beginning a conversation. Provide praise and support during the moment. When the goal is mastered, work toward achieving another goal. While practicing, keep in mind the following:
 - Help your child understand that everyone makes mistakes and encourage persistence.
 - Focus on brave behaviors and provide specific praise for doing something new or interacting with others. See the earlier discussion of brave challenges.
 - Notice and comment on strengths. This can take place in the moment or later on in private.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Websites

<https://childmind.org/topics/concerns/shyness/>

The website of the Child Mind Institute provides resources for parents and teachers of shy or anxious children.

<https://www.une.edu.au/about-une/academic-schools/bcss/news-and-events/psychology-community-activities/shy-student>

This article and related links present classroom strategies to address shyness.

Articles and Books

For Teachers

Brophy, J. (1996). Working with shy or withdrawn students. ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education: Urbana, IL. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED402070>

This article provides additional information on the presentation of shyness in the classroom, as well as classroom-based intervention strategies.

Coplan, R. J., & Rudasill, K. M. (2016). *Quiet at school: An educator's guide to shy children*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

This book is a comprehensive guide for educators on understanding shy students, with research-based strategies for improving shy students' social-emotional and academic functioning at school.

McClowry, S. G. (2014). *Temperament-based elementary classroom management*. Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield.

This book offers information on children's unique temperaments, including children with shy temperaments, as well as strategies for classroom management for each temperament profile.

For Parents

Fonseca, C. (2015). *Raising the shy child: A parent's guide to social anxiety*. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.

This book is a guide to social anxiety that provides parents and teachers with evidence-based strategies to use with children who present with social anxiety in order to enhance their development.

Gold, D. (2017, February 7). From wallflower to social butterfly: Skills for the shy preschooler [Webinar]. In *Child Study Center Webinars*. Retrieved from goo.gl/Ctismw

This 30-minute webinar, led by a clinical psychologist at the NYU Child Study Center, guides parents in understanding their preschool-age child's shyness and offers step-by-step guidance in creating "brave challenges" that can be adapted for school-age children.

Kendall, P. C., & Khanna, M. (2015). *Child Anxiety Tales: Web-based parent training for parents of youth with anxiety*. Ardmore, PA: Workbook Publishing. Available on CopingCatParents webpage. www.copingcatparents.com

The Child Anxiety Tales is an online evidence-based program that teaches parents about the use of cognitive-behavioral strategies for children with anxiety.

Markway, B., & Markway, G. (2006). *Nurturing the shy child: Practical help for raising confident and socially skilled kids and teens*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.

This book gives a comprehensive overview of shyness and social anxiety disorder, and provides parents, teachers, and caregivers with methods to cope with shyness and anxiety, as well as other mental health problems that are often associated with shyness and anxiety.

Related Helping Handouts

Anxiety: Helping Handout for School and Home
Improving Teacher-Student Relationships: Helping Handout for School

Selective Mutism: Helping Handout for School

Using Praise and Rewards Wisely: Helping Handout for School and Home

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