

# SHYNESS



Shyness is something that all people experience at one time or another. In most cases it is a normal, temporary behavior. In children, some shyness is normal, especially when they are around 5-6 months of age, and then again at about two years of age. Shyness at these ages is considered a normal part of development.

Shyness becomes a problem in a child when it interferes with relationships with other people, with social situations, school, and/or other important aspects of a child's life. Problems with shyness are usually evident by the time a child reaches three years of age.

Shyness, which can be defined as a fear of, or withdrawal from, other people or social situations, can have many different causes depending on the individual child and the specific circumstances.

Whatever the causes of shyness in a child, it is a behavior that parents must not ignore. Shyness can be very painful for a child to live with, and it can have negative effects on other aspects of a child's life. These negative effects can follow a child into adulthood, too. For example, many shy children develop low self esteem and lack self confidence. This can make it very difficult for shy children to make friends. Also, many shy children are so quiet that they don't receive the help they need from teachers at school, which may result in school performance that is not as good as it could be.

Fortunately, shyness is often not a difficult problem to correct. Its solution does, however, take a strong commitment from parents.

## Why Children Become Shy

As mentioned earlier, shyness can have many different causes. There may be a specific cause for shyness in some children, while in others shyness may occur for a number of different reasons. Here are some of the reasons why children become shy:

**\*Difficulty with frequent exposure to new situations.** Children, of

course, don't have the life experience that adults do. For this reason, children are frequently exposed to new situations. Some children have trouble coping with new situations, and tend to withdraw as a result.

**\*Heredity.** Some research has shown that shyness runs in families. It has not been determined if shyness that runs in families is genetic in cause, or if it is due to learning.

**\*Inconsistent parenting.** Some shyness may be caused by parenting practices that are not consistent, for example, punishing for a specific behavior one day, and then letting it slide by the next, being overinvolved with a child some of the time, and uninvolved at other times. Inconsistency makes children feel insecure, which can lead to shyness.

**\*Too much threatening, teasing, or criticism.** Children who are frequently threatened, teased or criticized, either by family members or by other people may learn to expect only negative feedback from others. This expectation will lead to the avoidance of social situations and contact with other people.

**\*Lack of parental involvement.** Some parents may seem

disinterested in their children's lives for a number of reasons. For example, parents may mistakenly believe that they will promote independence in their children if they let their children fend for themselves. Others simply may not have the time or the desire to be very involved in their children's lives. Whatever the reason, decreased parental involvement can lead children to believe that they are not worthy of others' attention. This will in turn affect social relationships. Children who do not believe that other people are interested in them will probably feel very uncomfortable in social situations.

**\*Lack of experience in social situations.** Children may become shy because they have not yet learned how to effectively take part in social situations. Thus, when exposed to social situations, these frightened children may withdraw.

**\*Low self-esteem or negative opinion of oneself.** Children who have low opinions of themselves expect other people to feel the same way, too. This belief can lead to shy behavior.

**\*Overprotective parents.** Children who are overprotected by their

parents often don't have the opportunity to be independent socially. Because of this, these children often lack the confidence needed to make decisions for themselves. Such children are often insecure, which can then cause shyness.

**\*Modeling or learned behavior.** Because children learn from watching their parents, parents who are shy often have children who are shy. Shy adults may have few friends or social interests, thus their children have difficulty learning how to make friends and how to behave socially.

**\*Shy temperament.** Some children seem shy almost from birth. Sometimes these shy babies grow into being shy children.

### **The Negative Effects of Shyness**

Shyness can affect children's lives in many different ways, and these effects can last throughout life.

**\*Difficulty making and maintaining friendships.** Friendships are a very important part of children's emotional development. Many shy children do not have the social skills necessary to make friends. Many shy children, too, are fearful of

social situations, and therefore avoid them. Because of this difficulty in making friends, shy children are often lonely.

**\*Difficulty sticking up for oneself.** Many shy children have trouble asserting themselves. As a result, they are often taken advantage of by peers, or talked into doing things that they don't want to do.

**\*Others may see shy children as aloof or stuck up.** Peers may misinterpret shyness as disinterest or aloofness. As a result, shy children may be avoided by peers.

**\*Difficulties with effective communication.** Because shy children often avoid other people and social situations, they often don't learn effective communication skills. Because they lack communication skills, shy children often have difficulty relating to other people.

**\*Difficulty expressing emotions.** Shy children have often not learned how to adequately express themselves. Because of this, shy children often bottle up their emotions.

**\*Shyness may lead to problems in school.** Shy children are often

reluctant to ask for help from their teachers when they need it. Because of this, questions shy children may have often go unanswered.

### **Prevention**

Shyness in children, in many cases, can be prevented. Here are some things that parents can do.

**\*Teach social skills.** Parents should begin teaching their children while they are very young how to behave in social situations. Parents should help their children learn how to make and maintain friendships. Parents can also teach their children appropriate social behaviors, such as saying please and thank-you, introducing oneself to others, etc. Parents should also make an effort to praise their children when they exhibit appropriate social behaviors.

**\*Model non-shy behaviors.** Parents should try to be good role models of non-shy behaviors. As mentioned before, shy parents often have shy children. Parents, therefore, must let their children see them making social contacts, expressing themselves, and interacting with others.

**\*Expose children to many different people and social situations.**

Starting when their children are young, parents should introduce their children to many different people, activities, and social situations. Parents can do this in many ways. For example, parents can enroll their children in play groups and other activities involving different people, starting when they are very young.

**\*Don't label children as shy or allow anyone else to.** Parents should avoid calling their children shy, because such children may live up to their parents' expectations. Children who are labeled as shy by their parents or others may begin to see themselves as shy, and may come to believe that there is little that can be done about their shyness. It is best for parents not to try to explain their children's bashfulness to others. However, if parents feel that they must explain their children's quietness and bashful behavior to others, they can say something like, "Joey needs time to get used to new people. He'll feel like talking a little later." Parents should also not allow other adults, siblings, or other children to label the child as shy. If labeling happens, parents should intervene.

**\*Help children feel capable.** Parents should take every

opportunity to help their children feel important, capable, and adequate. Such feelings, when instilled in children, enhance self-esteem. Parents can do this in many ways. They can give their children responsibilities such as chores. Parents should make sure that the tasks assigned are challenging, but well within their children's capabilities. Parents can also encourage their children to make decisions. This can be done in many ways. For example, even very young children can decide what to wear when given a choice out of two outfits. As children get older, they can make more and more decisions for themselves. However, parents should make sure that they are always available to help when needed.

**\*Provide lots of love, affection and attention.** Children thrive when they feel loved and cared for by their parents. Parents should take every opportunity to show their children that they are loved. This can be done through both words and actions. Love and affection are best given freely, not conditionally. Therefore, parents must make sure that their children know that they will always be loved, no matter what they do or say.

**\*Build a trusting relationship.** A part of shyness in children can be

mistrust of others. For this reason, parents should work hard to establish a trusting relationship with their children. Consistency, honesty, and openness are all important parts of a trusting relationship. Parents should try to be consistent in their actions toward their children so they know what to expect from their parents. Broken promises and inconsistent behavior can hurt trusting relationships. Parents should also be open and honest with their children, for children are very perceptive and can sense when information is being withheld or when they are being lied to. Furthermore, trust is a reciprocal relationship; parents must learn to trust their children so their children will learn to trust them.

**\*Teach effective communication.** Learning how to communicate with other people is an important skill for children to have. It builds confidence and self-esteem. Parents should start early by talking to their children frequently, and teaching their children how to express their feelings (even anger) appropriately. Since children learn a lot about communication by watching their parents, parents should try to set a good example, too, by expressing themselves appropriately. Parents should also create opportunities for

their children to feel comfortable talking to them about issues of concern.

**\*Provide adequate, appropriate discipline.** Discipline provides structure in children's lives. It allows children to learn which behaviors are acceptable and which are not. Appropriate discipline also helps children learn what to expect from their parents and the world around them, and as a result, appropriate discipline helps children feel secure. Parents must be careful not to discipline excessively. Any punishment should be appropriate for the behavior being punished. Children who are disciplined too severely often feel that they have no control over their lives, and this loss of control may result in shyness.

### **Intervention**

Sometimes despite the best efforts on the part of parents, children become shy. Here are some things that parents can do to help their children overcome shyness.

**\*Encourage changes slowly.** Any teaching parents do to help their children overcome shyness should involve gradual steps. Parents should ease their children into learning non-shy behaviors, teaching in small

steps. Parents must take care to give their children time to approach each new situation at their own pace.

**\*Be careful not to reinforce shyness.** Parents who pay too much attention to or punish their children's shy behavior may end up reinforcing it. Instead of trying to get shy children to speak or punishing children for exhibiting shyness, parents should try not to overreact. They should remain calm and treat shyness matter-of-factly.

**\*Don't tease or let other family members tease shy children.** Teasing, even if no harm is meant by it, can do serious harm to children's self-esteem. Children who are frequently teased may withdraw from others to avoid being teased. Parents should be careful not to tease their children and not to let others do so, either.

**\*Don't let shy children isolate themselves.** Since shy children are so often uncomfortable around other people, they have a tendency to withdraw from others and as a result spend a lot of time alone. Parents should not allow their shy children to spend long periods of time alone. Instead, parents can encourage their children's friendships, encourage activities with others, and praise

their children for their attempts at being sociable.

**\*Don't speak for shy children.** Shy children need to learn to speak for themselves, and they can only do this if they are given the chance. Parents who answer questions for and speak for their shy children may reinforce shy behavior.

**\*Praise non-shy behaviors and advances.** When children take steps to overcome their shyness, parents should provide ample amounts of praise. Behaviors that are rewarded with a smile, a pat on the back, or a good word are more likely to be repeated. Parents should remember to focus on their children's improvements, not their failures. Parents shouldn't criticize, nag or threaten their children when they act shy, nor should they force them to do things that they aren't ready to do. Instead, parents should provide opportunities for their children to socialize and encourage them to do so, but should respect their children's feelings if situations become overwhelming.

**\*Don't expect too much or too little from children.** While parents shouldn't expect their children to always be outgoing and talkative, it is not asking too much to expect

children to respond when someone speaks to them, or to participate in normal social activities. Parents should make sure their expectations for their children are neither too high nor too low, keeping in mind their children's ages and their individual personalities.

**\*Desensitize shyness.** Parents should take steps to expose their children to other people and situations that usually elicit shyness. Parents should be very careful to do this slowly and gradually, and to offer lots of support. To help their children prepare for such situations, parents can practice behaviors and responses with their children before attempting the real thing.

**\*Encourage and teach responsibility and independence.** Many shy children have learned to be too dependent on their parent(s) or other adults in their lives. Children who are overly dependent are often reluctant to take the risks involved in making friends and taking part in social activities. Parents must start early and provide their children with responsibilities that are within their child's capabilities. Responsibilities help children feel capable. Parents must also take steps to teach their children to be independent. This does not mean that parents should

require their children to behave like adults. Independence comes in gradual steps. Parents can encourage independence in their children by letting them do things for themselves when they are able to, by encouraging them to make decisions, and by encouraging them to solve their own problems. Again, parents should keep in mind their children's ages and ability levels. It is a great boost for self-esteem when children see themselves as responsible and independent.

**\*Practice and role play non-shy behaviors.** Parents can help their children practice non-shy behaviors by role playing. Parents can play the part of a peer or classmate, and children can practice, for example, starting a conversation, asking to be included in a game, etc. Another way to role play is role reversal. Parents can play the part of the shy child, and the shy child can play the part of a non-shy peer or classmate. Practicing non-shy behaviors helps give children the confidence needed to engage in these behaviors in real life situations.

**\*Teach assertiveness.** Parents should teach their children how to ask for the things that they want. Teaching assertiveness also involves showing children that they do not

have to give in to peer pressure. They can refuse to do things that they don't want to do. Parents should teach their children how to behave in an assertive manner and then leave it to them. They should avoid fighting their children's battles for them.

**\*Encourage involvement in activities where children can excel.** Parents should help their children find activities, such as sports or hobbies, at which they can excel. Being able to do something well is an excellent booster for self-esteem. Parents should be careful not to force their children, though, to participate in activities in which they are not interested.

**\*Communicate with children's teacher(s) and/or school.** Parents, being careful not to label their children as shy, should discuss the situation with their children's teacher and other school personnel. Parents should enlist their children's teacher's assistance in discouraging shy behaviors and encouraging appropriate social behaviors.

**\*Set up a reward system.** Parents can set up a reward system to encourage their children to behave in nonshy ways. Specific behaviors should be selected, for example,

inviting a friend over to play, responding when an adult speaks to them, making eye contact, etc. Children and parents should make a chart and hang it in the home. When non-shy behaviors occur, it should be recorded on the chart (for example by using a sticker, drawing a smiley face, etc.) When a certain amount of the targeted behaviors have occurred (a number decided upon by parents and children), a reward should be given. Rewards should be decided upon by children and parents together. Parents should keep in mind that material rewards such as toys or candy don't work as well as non-material rewards such as activities. Some examples of effective rewards include being allowed to stay up an hour past regular bedtime, going to the park to play, going on a picnic with the family, etc.

**\*Teach positive self-talk.** Positive self-talk is saying positive things about one's self to one's self. Positive self-talk is a very powerful tool for children to have. The more children repeat good things about themselves to themselves, the more likely they will be to actually believe them and incorporate the positive feelings that go along with them. With regard to shy children, parents can teach them to use positive

self-talk aimed at convincing children that they are not shy. For example, when a shy child gets up the courage to ask a friend over to play, he or she can say to himself something like, "I'm not shy. I can talk to people and make friends." Shy children often believe that there is nothing they can do about their shyness; that it is a part of their personalities that will not change. Parents should use positive self-talk to help teach their children that this is not true.



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