

Shyness

There is some evidence that at least some components of shyness are inherited—not an individual gene, but several probably contribute. But there is also evidence that the way parents structure the environment can make a difference for shy children.

It's impossible to tell if your child's shyness is inborn. So instead of worrying or looking for a "cure" for your child's shyness, look for ways of helping your child to have good feelings about self and others, and to feel positively about interactions with both adults and children. With support, even innately shy children can grow up to be friendly, confident adults (though that shy person will probably always remain somewhere inside).

You can help your child:

Realize that shyness is a normal feeling. Always accept your child's feelings of shyness—and communicate that a feeling of shyness is perfectly fine. Tell your child that shyness is a feeling; that feelings are generally under your control; that it's perfectly all right to feel shy. But also point out that how you act even though you have a shy feeling may affect how other people react to you. Helping a child develop social skills is kinder than letting them always act shy. Acknowledge their feeling of shyness, reflect how others see them, give them tools for being comfortable, model and role play what to do in social settings, and be patient.

Accept your child's shyness. It's very important to accept your child's shyness, but also to help them

learn positive ways of coping with the shyness. This can be hard, especially if you are naturally out-going. Your child is a separate person who shouldn't be expected to act the way you do. Viewing shyness as a shortcoming, expressing even subtle dissatisfaction with lack of social skills, or hinting that you are embarrassed can cause your child to withdraw even further. Accept your child as she/he is and encourage your child to like and accept him/herself.

Don't label your child. Calling your child "shy" to the child or when talking to others will make the label stick. Your comments could perpetuate shyness, even if it is not inborn. Later, it may lead the child to use the label to avoid unpleasant or uncomfortable situations. Avoid praising more out-going children and making comparisons. You risk hurting feelings and negatively affecting self-esteem.

Show you understand your child. Avoid scoffing at a child's anxiety when approaching new situations. Offer support and assurance.

Encourage your child. While you shouldn't push your child into social interactions, encourage your preschooler to participate in activities with other children. Sometimes a child may find it easier to play with younger children, taking on the role of "big sister/brother." Other times, playing with older children feels more comfortable in the role of "follower."

Rehearse with your preschooler. Use role playing games to help teach your child. For example, a

teddy bear is hanging around the edge of a playground, wanting to play with others, but is afraid to try. Ask your child what the bear should do. Offer suggestions your child can put to use. Conclude with a happy ending (teddy joins the group and has a great time).

Prepare your child. On your way to social events, spend a couple of minutes preparing your preschooler on what to expect. Go over names of people who will be there, the activities that might take place, and how to greet others when you arrive. Arriving early is often easier than late when everyone's eyes are on you. Tell your child it's okay not to talk to others, but that it's also okay to talk.

Equip your child. It can be easier to enter a social gathering if you have something in your hand. A doll, stuffed animal, or toy can provide security and may give an "in" with other children. Prepare the child that sharing the toy may be necessary. Asking your shy child to help someone else (put on a coat, pass out snacks, etc.) lets your child feel capable.

Help, if your child needs it. If your child is looking longingly over at a group of children at play, but doesn't know how to join in, give some pointers. Suggest showing the others a new toy. Or, if it's comfortable with your child, take your preschooler by the hand and enter the circle of play together, asking permission of the other children. (For example, "Could Kiley and I help you make that sand castle?") Stay as long as you need to, but no longer.

Respond to other children. If another child says your child is shy, reflect back how that child might be feeling or what they could do. (For example: "Yes, I think Janey is feeling shy. She often likes to watch until she feels comfortable. Or, "Are you wishing Janey would play with you? Maybe after she feels comfortable, she'll come and join you.") Try to

include your child in the interaction, not just talking about your preschooler. If someone says something rude or name calls, you probably need to call the person on it. That way you affirm to your child that shyness is all right.

There are no easy answers, and many judgement calls, required on the part of parents. You wonder, "Am I pushing too hard?" or "Should I push harder?" If your child does not participate in activities, you need to decide whether returning several times will help your preschooler join in or if by leaving the child learns not to try new activities. Your own observation of how your child is doing is the best guide.

Another difficulty is that a parent of a shy child may feel responsible for their shy child's lack of social skills. It can be embarrassing to have a child who looks or runs away when someone approaches or who you have to pry off when you arrive at a playgroup. Your child's feelings are real and can't be changed. Your job is to help her learn better ways of coping. See yourself as the "coach" who is patient and accepting. Praise any progress.

If your child's shyness interferes with your preschooler's life (she never participates at play group events, always hangs onto you at preschool, refuses to go to parties), discuss the problem with your doctor. There are counseling options and early, gentle interventions that can successfully modify extreme shyness in young children.

Sources:

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November, 2000