

Understanding the Shy Child

Most preschoolers are shy at times; it's a natural part of human development. But for extremely shy children, everyday interactions with others can seem almost impossible. This level of shyness can cause unnecessary anxiety and prevent children from experiencing the spontaneous fun of just being a kid. How can parents of shy children give them a boost while respecting their feelings?

What Is Shyness?

A little background information can help you understand what's going on in your shy preschooler. First, know that shyness is a developmentally normal and common characteristic among preschoolers. Shyness is a response to what a child views as a scary or overwhelming situation. Being shy gives the child some space between herself and the situation. It also gives her some time to figure out how she wants to approach things. Usually, shyness lessens 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 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. Parents of shy children may notice this fear when they see their preschooler become nervous in situations in which the spotlight is on them, such as being introduced to a new person.

What Does Shyness Look Like?

Shyness in children takes many forms, but very shy preschoolers exhibit some combination of the following behaviors when they are outside the home or with people they don't know well:

- They seldom speak voluntarily.
- They do not respond when spoken to by a teacher or peer.
- They follow directions but do not respond verbally to them.
- When they do speak, it is often in a very soft and quiet voice.
- They turn away when spoken to by others and make little or no eye contact.



- They often look at the ground when around unfamiliar people.
- They watch but do not join in play with other children.
- They are last to volunteer and line up for activities at school.
- They look tense, distracted, or worried in unfamiliar situations.
- They may refuse to enter a new setting without a parent with them.

What Are the Effects of Shyness?

While shyness has 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 viewed as unfriendly by their classmates, experience fewer friendships, and have fewer opportunities to practice their developing social skills. Severe shyness may even restrict a child’s learning and prevent a preschooler from enjoying his time at school each day.

What Can Parents Do to Help?

Sensing the difficulties associated with shyness, parents 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, parents should be careful to not interpret a child’s shyness as willfulness or spite. Instead, approach the process the same way you 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.

1. Avoid labeling your child as “shy.”

When parents label their child as “shy,” they are doing two things. First, they are stripping the child of their many other qualities and allowing the label to define the child’s personality. Second, labeling the child as “shy” encourages the child to view himself that way. This can cause him to act out the “shy” role without making an effort to change. When faced with a new situation, a child who knows he has been labeled as shy by his parents 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.

2. Teach social skills.

Teach your child specific social skills, such as how to meet new people, greet others, initiate conversations, join in play, make eye contact, and be a good listener. To teach and practice these skills, role-play or use puppets to act out different situations. Teach your child specific phrases to use, such as "Hi, my name is Maria," and, "Can I play, too?" so she will be ready when the situation arises.

3. Explain the benefits of being outgoing.

Explain to your child the good things that will come from acting more outgoing, such as making more friends, having more fun, and enjoying school more. Offer a personal example of a time when you overcame your own shyness and explain why that experience was good for you. You are an important figure to your child, and knowing that you have felt shy at times can encourage her to act as you did.

4. Help your child meet and make friends.

Make an effort to expose your child to new children and settings, but be sure to do so gradually—for example, by visiting a park where the same children play repeatedly. Don't force your child to interact with unfamiliar children right away; give him time to warm up. Arrange play dates for your child at home, where he



already feels comfortable and safe. When your child is working or playing with another child, give him the words he needs to do so, such as, "Tell Han that you would like to help too," and, "Ask Sophie what game she would like to play." Another way to prompt your 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." Research also suggests that pairing a shy child with an older or younger child can create a positive social interaction.

5. Set goals and reward progress.

Work with your preschooler to set behavior goals and track his or her progress. Start small and gradually build. For example, a manageable goal might be to ask a teacher a question or say hello to a neighbor. When your child reaches the goal, mark it on a progress chart and offer lots of praise or a small treat as a reward.

6. Praise outgoing behavior.

As with any behavior you want to see from your child, to reinforce the skill, praise her with lots of warmth and affection when she acts outgoing. If she would be embarrassed by your compliments in public, tell her how well she has done in private.

7. Model outgoing behavior.

Your child learns how to act in large part by watching you, so be sure to act outgoing and friendly toward others in front of your child. Be a model for your child and he is likely to want to imitate your actions.

8. Build your child's self esteem.

Children who feel good about themselves are less likely to be shy. Identify your child's strengths and build on them. Is your child creative? athletic? musically inclined? Encouraging these skills will allow your preschooler to see himself as a talented and capable child. This sense of confidence can help him become braver in social situations.

9. Use books.

Read books with your child that feature characters who have overcome their shyness. Use the stories as a starting point for discussions with your child about shyness and how it affects his or her life. Some suggested titles include:

- *Buster the Very Shy Dog* by Lisze Bechtold
- *Louder, Lili* by Gennifer Choldenko
- *Tyler Is Shy* by Susan Hood
- *Gretchen Groundhog, It's Your Day!* by Abby Levine
- *Say Hello, Vanessa* by Marjorie Weinman Sharmat and Lillian Hoban

10. Communicate with teachers.

Team up with your preschooler's teachers to create a plan together. Talk frequently about the strategies you're using at home that are effective. Work together to set goals for your child. A consistent approach between school and home can increase the results of your efforts.

Reaping the Rewards

With understanding, warmth, and targeted strategies, parents can help a shy child develop the social skills needed to succeed in preschool and beyond. As your child develops these skills, the rewards will come in small, daily victories that add up to a strong and confident child.

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