

Understanding the 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?

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 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:

- They seldom speak voluntarily.
- They do not respond when spoken to by a teacher or classmate.
- 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 and make little or no eye contact.
- They often look at the ground around unfamiliar people.
- They watch but do not join in play with other children.

- They are last to volunteer and line up for activities.
- They look tense, distracted, or worried in unfamiliar situations.
- They may refuse to enter a new setting without a familiar adult with 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 Can Teachers Do to Help?

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. Avoid labeling children as “shy.”



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, which can cause her to simply fulfill that role without making an effort to change. 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.

3. 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?”

4. 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.

5. 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:

- **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.

- **Provide specific prompts.** When shy children are working or playing with others, give them the words they need to engage socially, 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 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.”
- **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.
- **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.

6. Praise Outgoing Behavior.

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.

7. Utilize literature.

Read books that feature characters who overcome their shyness. Use each story as a starting point for a larger discussion about shyness. 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

8. Communicate with parents.

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.

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.

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