

## **The Shy Child Tips for Parents**

Shyness is normal a temperament. A temperament is a person's innate behavioral style they use to solve problems. It is part of their "wired" personality. Temperament can be changed by experiences, and interactions with people, however it is relatively stable over time.

Shyness is normal behavior for children especially in their early development. Depending on previous experiences most children by age three have developed enough language and social skills to begin to separate and seek relationships. This is especially true for relationships with same aged peers.

Some children become shy because of harsh criticism or verbal abuse however most are "born" this way. Significant shyness after age three is most often temperamental. Most will do well in a relationship or social setting once they are past the initial warming up period. Some mildly affected children only behave this way during stressful transitions such as entry to new schools and during early adolescence.

A temperamentally shy child is slow and cautious to reach out for something or someone unfamiliar. Typically the shy child wants affiliation however is unwilling or unable to make the first move towards someone or something unfamiliar. They may be fearful or easily embarrassed, feeling vulnerable to scrutiny

Early Adolescence can be especially socially awkward and self conscious. This is normal for a period of great physical, emotional, and cognitive change, complicated by an adolescent's need for peer acceptance. Adolescents need peer acceptance in attempt to become individuals, separate from parents and family.

In an otherwise temperamentally shy child it is important to know they want affiliation. Friendships are important in helping us develop our own self esteem and self concept. In assisting a Shy child, the object is not to change the child, (change the temperament) but to encourage new behaviors which are beneficial the child.

Shyness however can be a sign of Social Phobia if:

- The child is more than just a little slow warming up to normal social situations
- It occurs well beyond normal life transitions.
- It occurs both with adults and same aged peers
- It affects school or classroom participation
- The parents or peers compensate for the child's reluctance to engage in common social transactions
- It is accompanied by significant distress, avoidance, or inhibition.
- The child is having physical symptoms in association to social experiences, such as headaches and stomachaches.

If many of the above symptoms occur, it is important to have the child evaluated for Social Phobia as well as to rule out other disorders. Other disorders may include, Separation Anxiety Disorders, Depression, Language and Developmental disorders, and Verbal and or Physical Abuse.

Tips to assist your child handle normal temperamental Shyness include:

Respect and acknowledge the natural shy tendency in the child. Never criticize the child for their shyness because criticism may only further worsen the shyness. Reaffirm that they are not alone with feelings of shyness. Discuss with the child their feelings, acknowledge them and then discuss the advantages that can be gained by taking social initiatives. (Friends, less loneliness, more activities, more learning, more opportunities)

Respect the temperament however do not overindulge or overprotect. Allow the child to experience moderate amounts of frustration, and challenges with gradual social exposures. Gently and persistently nudge but do not push. Progress, not perfection is needed, so be patient.

Prepare the child for new experiences or environments, by visiting new a place, and meeting key people before hand. Role playing a situation before hand can help the child anticipate and deal with any anxiety.

Use teachers as allies. Use the teacher to evaluate if the behavior is shyness, while reaffirming that the quietness is not due to low intelligence, low interests, or other issues.

Help the child deal with teasing about being shy. Shy children are more self-conscious, so they are more easily embarrassed and sensitive to criticisms. They will need more support and encouragement .to develop more self-esteem.

Help the child build new friendships by inviting a friend of the child over to the home. Occasionally the child may do better with slightly younger children.

Find appropriate activities that expand on the child's own interests, while providing needed social contacts. Make sure they are the child's own interests and not those you have for the child.

If your child does not make improvement with the above tips, they may need further evaluation for Social Phobia or other problem(s).

Suggested reading:

Know Your Child  
Chess S, Thomas A  
New York: Basic Books, 1987

Conquering Shyness  
Cheek JM, Cheek B  
New York: Dell trade Paperback, 1990  
For shy teenagers and their parents

### **Children Without Friends**

At one time or another, most children enjoy spending time alone. Perhaps after a long day at school or a busy weekend, they prefer just to relax by themselves, reading a book or playing a video game.

As normal as this type of behavior is, there may be cause for concern when a child has no friends, and especially when she feels lonely or socially inadequate. She may not get invited to parties, often sits alone during school lunch, is not picked to be part of a team, and receives few, if any, telephone calls.

Often, an unpopular child develops a self-image or a reputation among her peers that is difficult to alter. Even if the youngster makes improvements in her social style, labels and peer perceptions are hard to change. Children may decide to cling to their biases, and thus even when the unpopular youngster has finally moved into a group, she may not be fully accepted or welcomed. So although technically she may no longer be an outsider, she still may experience feelings of loneliness, isolation and diminished self-esteem.

While some unpopular children can change their behavior, others cannot and continue to behave in a way that interferes with their ability to make friends. Some youngsters simply have difficulty acquiring the new social skills they need. Others actually are not even aware that they are having trouble with relationships. Still others have come to expect rejection as part of their lives, and these expectations become self-fulfilling prophecies keeping them from behaving in ways that would promote friendships. Sometimes several of these influences are at work at the same time, reinforcing one another.

### **Possible Reasons for Lack of Friends**

Although children sometimes feel they are the sole cause of their lack of friends, that is not the case. Friendship is a two-way, dynamic process that depends on how children perceive one another. In middle childhood, youngsters tend to see one another in absolute terms, often lacking appreciation for more subtle individual differences or unique characteristics.

In some cases, children do not have opportunities to make friends, which requires time and energy. They are too programmed in highly structured activities, live far away from school, live in areas without children's facilities or activities, or are bound tightly to their families. A family's financial stress, or frequent changes of jobs and homes, can add to the difficulty of making friends.

A child without friends is, for parents, a difficult and painful dilemma. The problem is not uncommon; as many as 10 percent of school-age children say they have no best friend. These children may feel lonely and socially isolated and, as a result, have emotional and adjustment difficulties or fail to master the social skills so necessary for success with peers or adults.

### **Why Some Children Don't Have Friends**

Children may have social problems for a wide variety of reasons, some of which are outside their control - and yours. Following are some of the factors that might be contributing to your child's difficulty in making or keeping friends.

#### ***Child-Related Influences***

- Temperament
- Attention problems/hyperactivity
- Learning disabilities
- Social skill problems
- Communication skill difficulties
- Delayed physical, emotional, or intellectual development
- Physical handicap
- Chronic illness, frequent hospitalizations, school absenteeism
- Poor gross motor skills, limiting participation in group activities
- Emotional difficulties (depression, anxiety, low self-esteem)
- Poor personal hygiene
- Unattractive physical appearance
- Child chooses or prefers to be alone
- Child derives social satisfaction and friendship mainly from family members
- Cultural values do not fit those of peers

#### **Parent-Related Influences**

- Parenting style (too authoritarian, too permissive) adversely affects child's social development
- Parent keeps child too busy with programmed activities, chores, or jobs that limit time, energy, or opportunities for developing friendships
- Parent is overly critical or negative of child's choice of friends

- Parent has poor social skills; child does not have a good role model
- Parent has depression or mental illness
- Parent has substance abuse problem
- Parenting style includes domestic chaos or violence
- Parents experience marital stress, tension, abuse
- Parent overprotects child or imposes excessive limits on activities
- Parent has difficulty adjusting to child's individuality or special needs

### **Social-Environmental Influences**

- Family lives in rural, isolated area
- Family residence is far from school
- Neighborhood has few other children
- Family goes away all summer
- Family experiences financial stress and frequent moves
- Family has cultural or language differences
- Community has few opportunities or programs for children to gather and socialize
- Danger of violence in usual play areas prevents children from interacting
- Child's peer group perceives differences in dress, values, and behavior.

### **Children Who Are Shy, Rejected or Neglected**

Although childhood shyness is commonplace, it concerns many parents, especially those who place great value on sociability. Some children become shy because of harsh life experiences, but most are born that way. For some middle-years children, social situations and interactions can be terrifying. When they come in contact with new children, they rarely feel at ease. Typically, they are unwilling or unable to make the first move, preferring to abandon a potential friendship rather than reach out to the unfamiliar. A few of these timid children may be emotionally distressed, but they are in the minority. In fact, some children are just naturally withdrawn and slow to warm up in new situations.

In some cases, shyness can be disabling. Extremely shy children often do not adapt as well as most of their peers in the classroom and on the playground. The longer this pattern exists, the more difficult it is for children to change. Shyness can increasingly lead to purposeful avoidance of social settings and withdrawal, and ultimately create an inability to function effectively as a social adult. If your child's shyness becomes debilitating, it may be caused by an anxiety disorder or a temperament pattern; then an evaluation by a child mental-health professional would be helpful.

Most shy children, however, do well in relationships and in social settings once they are past an initial period of adjustment. Children who have difficulty establishing and maintaining relationships even after the ice-breaking period merit more concern and attention. Eventually, many (and perhaps most) children who are shy learn to conquer their tendency. They function in ways that are not obviously timid or reticent, although inside they may still feel shy. Parents can gently guide or direct their children into social situations in which they can learn to successfully interact.

## **Rejected Children**

Most children want to be liked, yet some are slow in learning how to make friends. Others may long for companionship but might be excluded from one group or another, perhaps picked on because of the way they dress, poor personal hygiene, obesity, or even a speech impediment. Youngsters are often rejected by peers if they exhibit disruptive or aggressive behavior. Still other children may hover on the fringes of one clique or another but never really get noticed. These neglected children spend most of their time alone.

Rejected youngsters are overtly disliked by their peers and are constantly made to feel unwelcome. They often tend to be aggressive or disruptive and very sensitive to teasing. They may be bullies and rule-violators, or they may be so unsure of themselves that they invite the rejection of others. They might also be rejected because of their impulsive and disruptive behavior. Some of them may have attention deficits or hyperactivity.

## **Neglected Children**

Neglected children, on the other hand, are not overtly rejected and teased but are often just ignored, forgotten, not invited to parties, and are the last ones picked for a team. These youngsters may be perceived as loners but might be passive and detest their isolation. Others may actually prefer to be alone. This latter group might be respected and admired by others but simply feel more comfortable in solitary pursuits or in spending time with parents, siblings other adults, or even pets. They may also lack the social skills and self-confidence necessary for them to enter social arenas, often because of limited social experiences. Or they may be more shy, quiet and reserved than most of their peers.

## **How Parents Can Help**

Successful peer interactions require a variety of skills and special ways of interacting. Parents should look for these skills in their children and help develop and model them.

- Coping with failure and frustration
- Coping with success
- Coping with change and transitions
- Coping with rejection and teasing
- Managing anger
- Using humor
- Forgiving
- Apologizing
- Refusing to accept a dare
- Thinking up fun things to do
- Expressing affection
- Avoiding dangerous situations
- Defending himself
- Comforting someone
- Sharing
- Making requests
- Self-disclosure

- Giving a compliment
- Expressing appreciation
- Coping with loss
- Sticking up for a friend
- Doing favors
- Asking for help
- Helping others
- Keeping secrets

## **What You Can Do if Your Child is Lacking Friends**

As a first step in helping your child overcome her loneliness and isolation, you and your youngster need to acknowledge that a problem exists. In a sensitive, supportive manner, talk about this situation together. Although denial, sadness, embarrassment, or rationalization are normal responses, you and your child need to get beyond them.

### **Maintain Open Communication at Home**

Encourage your youngster to talk openly about her concerns and difficulties regarding friendships. She is much more aware of her social scene than you are, so be a good listener. At the same time, this is an extremely sensitive subject, and problems may be difficult for your youngster to acknowledge. Her own insights and understanding of the group dynamics may be limited.

Avoid downplaying the social problems that your child is having with her peers. Let your child know that you are sensitive to how difficult this situation is for him, and that you are going to help him figure out ways to make things better. Give him a clear message that you are on his side and are going to help.

When your youngster is in pain, if you offer only simple reassurance, you may communicate that you neither understand nor care. For example, if peers are calling her a wimp or a nerd, do not advise her just to ignore them. That is like asking an adult not to be concerned when she loses her job. Be accepting, nonjudgmental and very sympathetic.

### **Find Balance Between Empathy and Responsibility**

In many cases your child may be able to solve her social problems without your direct intervention. If she is being excluded from the basketball games at the playground on Saturday afternoons, for instance, nothing could be worse for her stature among her peers than for you to show up and insist that she be allowed to play. ("Look who needs her mommy to stick up for her!") Also, if you constantly rescue her, she will become overly dependent on you or resent your well-intentioned efforts, rather than find solutions on her own.

### **Ask Some Key Questions**

Parents can ask some direct questions of their child, but there is a fine line between being interested and being intrusive and interrogating. Cautiously try to get a sense of how your child views the situation she finds herself in. Pose questions like:

- Are you pretty popular?
- Who is popular? Why are they popular? Is it because other kids like them, or is it because they want to be like them?
- Are there any children you can really talk to and trust?

- Do the children you know call each other names? What kinds of names do they use? Do you ever get called names?
- Is there a particular group you would like to be part of, or someone you would like to be friends with?
- Do you worry about what other children think of you?

### **Observe Your Child**

If appropriate - and without embarrassing your youngster - observe your child when she is with some of her peers, perhaps at a pizza parlor restaurant, an athletic event or a movie. See how she comes across, what her mood is like, and what actions may create conflict or isolation.

Later, talk with your child about what has occurred and together see if there are other ways she might have interacted with her friends. Focus on specific, concrete behavior, and use real-life examples. For instance: "At the pizza parlor I noticed that you took a few sips out of Emily's soft drink. How do you think she felt about that? What might you have done differently? Did you feel you were being yourself with your friends, or were you trying to act differently because they were there?"

In order to help your child when she is having difficulty making friends, you must understand the specific problems she faces. Besides observing her interactions in various situations, you might tactfully gather information from siblings and peers. Find out about the peer groups and cliques with which your youngster has to deal. Get to know her friends' parents and share with them your observations about the children's activities. Also, learn as much as you can about what takes place at particularly vulnerable sites, away from adult supervision, like bus stops, lunchrooms, and bathrooms. You might even videotape your child's social interactions - at a birthday party, for instance - so you can study them more closely.

### **Get Information from School**

Ask your child's teacher or the playground supervisor at school how she interacts with other youngsters. Inquire about her social interactions, not only in the classroom but also in those vulnerable areas. The bus driver may provide some useful information about interactions in the bus.

The teacher may have impressions of whether your youngster comes on too strong, or whether she is withdrawn. You may find that she has some eccentric habits that make her the butt of jokes or bullying among her peers. The teacher may have some suggestions on what your child can do to make friends or identify other children with like interests. Also, a group of youngsters with similar needs might benefit from a few sessions with a qualified professional.

### **Initiate a Plan**

With this information in hand, you might be able to focus on specific problems and guide your child in appropriate directions, perhaps developing a strategy for entering into a group activity and practicing how to start and maintain conversations and deal effectively with minor and major conflicts. Spend a few minutes talking with her about the perspective of other children - what they might think of her and what they consider important. By encouraging her to talk with you about her struggles with friendships, you will have the opportunity to guide and teach her how to get along. And if you maintain and nurture other areas of gratification and success, you can help your child become resilient and persistent in her attempts to gain success in the social domain.

### **Direct Your Child**

A child in this position needs help and guidance to find social events or initiate activities. Guide her into situations where she is likely to meet other youngsters and develop friendships. Encourage her to invite someone in her class to spend the night at your home, or to accompany your family on an outing to the beach.

To increase your child's likelihood of success, suggest that she spend time with peers whose temperaments and interests are similar to her own. More active girls, for instance, tend to have greater camaraderie with equally active playmates. Try to assist your youngster's entry into the group by encouraging her to build one or two special friendships. Pick the friend your child seems closest to, and one who seems to have a similar temperament, and provide them with opportunities to spend time together, first in relatively brief, structured activities, and then in progressively less structured ones. Short visits and structured activities are usually the easiest first steps.

As a starting point, invite your child's friend to go bowling or to a sporting event, a movie or a play - something where the two of them won't have to engage in much conversation face to face but can do something together side by side. Let them warm up gradually with an activity that has a definite end, rather than an open-ended day at the beach or "spending the afternoon." Usually if the activity itself is pleasurable and time limits are brief, the odds of success increase dramatically. Unstructured activities can follow if the initial encounters are successful and might be at a selected place-a park or a playground-or simply be at

home without designated things to do. Your own discreet monitoring may be necessary to prevent any potential problems.

As these friendships develop, get to know your child's playmates better. Encourage your youngster to invite them over to your house to play. Also, make contact with the parents of her friends. Keep the lines of communication open between families.

### **Identify Your Child's Strengths or Interests**

Encourage your child to use her strengths to make friends. If she has a good sense of humor, for example, she might be able to take advantage of it in a class play or other situation where she is likely to be appreciated by peers. If she likes animals, she might meet others with the same interest, go to the zoo with them, watch nature/wildlife videos together or do a group project.

Help your child develop a skill or interest that will allow her to fit in with peers. This should be done in a way that suits your child and does not force her to change in ways that make her feel uncomfortable.

Highlight your youngster's strengths and talents that make you proud of her, and that might be used to help overcome her social difficulties. Remind her that most of her peers probably have areas that they need to work on too

### **Carefully Select Social Activities**

Encourage your child to avoid situations that are likely to lead to embarrassment. For instance, if your youngster is poorly coordinated, organized sports may be a poor choice. Instead, help her take advantage of her strengths, selecting activities where she can excel. Or involve her in individual noncompetitive sports activities.

Ask your child if she would like to sign up for a Scouting program or other group activity, an excellent way to meet and share experiences with a group of children the same age. Look into the group composition and activities of the Scout troop beforehand, making sure that your child fits in with the other youngsters. Be cautious of activities that are so competitive that conventional friendships are not emphasized.

When a child is having social difficulties, describe them beforehand to the adult leaders (camp counselors, church leaders) of the programs in which she participates. Ask these adults to give your youngster a little more attention if problems arise, and to provide you with ongoing feedback.

### **Tutor a Skill**

If your child has some skill but not enough to satisfy her own need to succeed or to be admitted into the circle of children with better skills, individual lessons may be helpful. Depending on the skill, a relative, local coach, teacher, or older student may help your child develop her skills to the point where they may build her self-esteem and enhance her popularity. These skills might include sports, music, or writing. Or again, a specialized camp or weekend workshop may be the ideal niche.

## **Developing Social Skills**

Good social skills are necessary for success, security, and adjustment in life, whether in the home, the classroom, the playground or the community. When a child is able to interact well with others, she will develop and maintain resiliency when encountering stress and will be better able to compensate for shortcomings or failures in other parts of life. On the other hand, inadequate or inappropriate social skills—and the peer rejection that they may cause—can contribute to social, behavioral, emotional and academic problems.

What are social skills? They are the verbal and nonverbal behaviors that occur during everyday social interactions. Some are innate; most are learned. Usually, children learn their social skills at home, with friends in the community, at school or in places of worship. However, as these institutions change, the development of these skills is being affected. The American family structure, for instance, is in transition. More than ever before, mothers are working, and many children live in households with a single parent or as part of a stepfamily. No matter how the family is structured, it is not immune to marital, financial or health-related stresses, which can interfere with a family's time together. Yet families are the primary place in which children learn social skills.

America's schools are also changing. The diversity of students is increasing, and schools are being called upon to respond to an ever-widening range of individual abilities and needs. School personnel, who are having to cope with budget changes, redistribution of funds, and increasing class size, have new and increasing responsibilities, including the need to attend to the complex emotional and social needs of children. As schools stretch limited resources to address the academic needs of their students, the development of social skills may not get all the attention it deserves.

Furthermore, children increasingly spend more time outside the family in a variety of peer-group organizations, such as day care and preschool and after-school programs. As a result, time spent with other children is on the rise, increasing both the opportunity to learn and the need for good social skills.

### **Does Your Child Have Problems with Social Skills?**

To help you understand how your child relates to others, talk to her teachers, coaches and even friends (in a confidential, discreet manner). What are her strengths? What are her difficulties? Do the difficulties appear to be isolated incidents, related to a specific difficult situation or stress? Or are they long-term problems, repeated patterns that are leaving her unpopular and unhappy? If they tend to fall into the latter category, you'll need to take some action. Try to pinpoint the components of social interactions that create the most problems for your child - for instance, does she have trouble reaching out and "breaking the ice," even with just simple statements such as "How are you today?"

If you suspect that your child has difficulties with social interactions, the following questions might help pinpoint the problem.

Does your child have difficulty:

- Entering and joining a group?
- Keeping a friend?
- Dealing with teasing and provocation?
- Effectively managing major conflicts?
- Successfully participating in group activities?
- Responding to failure or disappointment?
- Responding to success?
- Meeting the expectations of peers, parents and teachers?
- Considering other people's feelings?

## **Friendship**

### **Understanding Children's Friendships**

Children need friends. Through friendships, youngsters broaden their horizons beyond the family unit, begin to experience the outside world, form a self-image, and develop a social support system.

Friends play many roles in a child's life, serving as companions, confidants, and allies, sharing advice and feelings, and providing stability and support in difficult times. Friends also supply feedback that allows children to measure, judge, and make adjustments within themselves, while answering the nagging and important question "How am I doing?" In some natural sequences, children move through stages in which their friendships first emphasize common activities and similarities in outlook, then are characterized by shared values and rules; finally, as puberty approaches, they focus on understanding others, self-disclosure, shared interests, and stronger emotional bonds.

A number of factors play a role in determining whom a child befriends. Some research shows that the friends a youngster chooses tend to share mutual traits with him and/or possess characteristics that he would like to have. Thus, as a child's preferences and goals change--which they inevitably do as he grows--he will make new friends to satisfy his evolving needs and desires and fit his own self-image.

Children also select friends with similar temperaments and patterns of play. Shy youngsters tend to be attracted to others like themselves; loud and boisterous children usually choose boisterous friends. Youngsters interested in the same activities and hobbies are drawn together as well.

Even so, youngsters differ in the rate at which they develop friendships. Also, some desire and need friends more than others. While certain children may be quite content spending most of their time by themselves, with family members, or with just a single best friend, others may be much more gregarious, forming and maintaining many friendships. The average school-age youngster has about five close friends. However, a child's preferences and needs may change from year to year and even from month to month. In most cases there is no reason for concern when a child decides to limit the number of his friends, unless he also seems depressed or is being rejected by his schoolmates.

Language skills are another component for building and solidifying good friendships. During middle childhood, friends learn to communicate clearly with one another, sharing secrets, stories, feelings, and jokes. Children with language or speech problems often have difficulty making friends, frequently using inappropriate words and missing out on subtle messages and cues--verbal as well as nonverbal--from their peers.

If a child feels good about himself, and if he has been loved and respected within the family, he is more likely to make good choices of friends. If you and your spouse relate to each other well, and if your child has caring and supportive relationships with his brothers and sisters, he will have seen and experienced positive examples of how people can relate, and he will carry these impressions over into his own friendships, including the friends he chooses. On the other hand, if those family experiences have not been supportive and confidence-boosting, he is likely to seek out peers who have similar types of troubles. Take some time to help your child understand why he chooses the friends he does. This is an opportunity to discuss his own values, feelings, and behaviors.