

Helping Children Overcome Shyness

There is plenty of debate in the psychological research community about whether childhood shyness is caused by nature or nurture, but it is generally agreed that a shy child can have problems as he or she matures. While shy children tend to be less prone to causing trouble with “show off” behaviour or bullying their peers, there are practical, social and emotional problems associated with shyness that can be quite debilitating. Shy children tend to make fewer friends, be uncomfortable in social situations, feel lonely, have low self-esteem and avoid activities such as public speaking and drama for fear of embarrassment in front of others.

But parents and schools can join forces to help children overcome shyness. Firstly, it is important to try not to label a child as shy. As soon as a child sees him or herself as “the shy child” it can be very hard to reverse the behaviours that make him or herself shy. Instead, turn the situation into a positive by letting your child know about the benefits of being outgoing, such as making more friends by talking to other children, and school being more fun if they participate in class discussions.

Empathy is important too. “Parents and teachers can help a shy child overcome fears if they tell the child that it is normal to feel afraid of certain situations – and then discuss why these feelings arise,” comments Mrs Valerie Thomas-Peter, Director of School at the Alice Smith

School. “This is the first step towards finding ways to help that child. If a parent is worried about their shy child, it is important to discuss this with the school, just as schools should also contact parents if they feel a child is not progressing socially. For us, social and emotional growth is as important as academic development.”

Setting goals for shy children can also be helpful, possibly even with a progress chart at home where stars can be added every time a child does something to become more outgoing, such as speaking in front of a small group, speaking in front of the entire class or joining in play with another child. Exposing your child to new settings and people is also useful – encourage him or her to place an order when you are at a restaurant, to talk to new children who move in on your street, and to help make new children in class feel welcome by talking to them and inviting them to join in games at the playground.

“It is important to aim for gradual changes rather than pushing a child to become an instant social butterfly,” adds Mrs Thomas-Peter. “If you push a child too hard and too fast, he or she may resist change but if you are gentle, empathetic and introduce children to new situations, people and environments slowly but surely, the chance of the child coming out of his or her shell is much greater.”

Contributed by Alice Smith School

