

Christopher A. Kearney, Ph.D.



SILENCE IS NOT GOLDEN

Strategies for Helping the Shy Child

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1

Defining Shyness

“Samantha always seems so shy and will not approach people at school. I feel worried for her. What can I do?”

“Evan cries a lot and just seems so unhappy around other children. This is so stressful for all of us. How can we help our son?”

“The school just told me that Jaden will not talk to anyone at school. Why is she doing this? What will happen to her?”

“Ryan just seems to mope around a lot and never wants to play with friends. He even wants us to place him in home schooling. I’m so confused. Should I teach him at home?”

“Isabel complains of headaches and stomachaches around people and always wants to leave birthday parties and other social events early. What can we do to make life easier for her?”

“Tashi just moved here and seems so shy. I thought she would have gotten over her initial fears by now. What can I do to help her?”

Do any of these situations sound familiar to you? When a child is overly shy or seems unhappy around other people, family members are often frustrated, distressed, concerned, and confused. But that’s understandable. After all, we naturally expect our children to have friends, associate with others, and enjoy social interactions. If your child has trouble relating to others or will not even speak to others, then you might be wondering: What do I do? What might happen? How can I get my child more interested in social situations? All of these reactions are perfectly normal.

Having a child who is overly shy and who has trouble interacting with others can be upsetting because we do not like our children to be distressed and we worry what will happen if they do not have friends. What makes intense shyness even more upsetting is that the behavior can be hard to understand. But be assured—you *can* get your overly shy child to develop friendships and have a good quality of life. The main purpose of this book is to help you understand the different parts of shyness and to give you and your child the means to handle these different parts. The main purpose of this chapter is to explain shyness and to give you an idea of what this book is about.

What Is Shyness and Social Situations?

All of us act with different levels of nervousness in social situations (see Fig. 1.1). Some people seem fearless when they meet someone new or speak before others—we often admire this quality in a person! Most of us, though, are somewhat nervous when we meet someone for the first time or when we go on a job interview or blind date. This is normal. Our nervousness in these situations usually eases once we get accustomed to the person or situation and once our confidence grows.

Other people are a bit higher on the spectrum of social discomfort and are shy (Fig. 1.1). All of us have a pretty good idea of what shyness is—we seem to know it when we see it—but shyness does have different parts. Shyness generally refers to the following:

- Possible physical discomfort around others
- Concerns or worry about evaluations from others
- A tendency to withdraw from social situations and pursue solitary activities

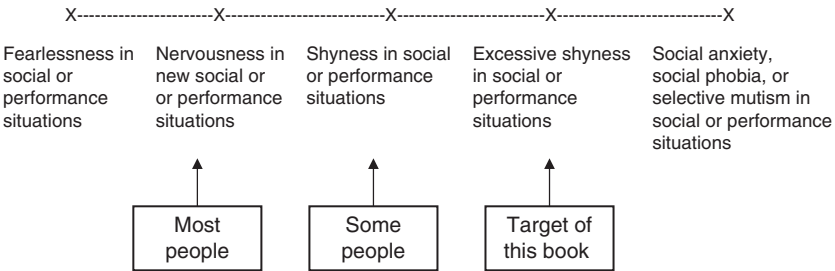


Figure 1.1. Spectrum of social discomfort.

Many people are shy! Researchers estimate that 20–48% of the general population is shy. Shyness is a kind of temperament or emotional state or personality trait that many people have. Shyness itself is normal and is not necessarily a bad thing. *Excessive shyness*, however, can be a problem and is the focus of this book (Fig. 1.1).

Social situations refer to settings in which we interact with others or perform before others. Children interact with other children and adults in many situations such as school, church, recreational centers, extra-curricular activities, sporting events, and gatherings like sleepovers, parties, or family reunions. Children also perform before others in situations that involve academic, athletic, musical, or other feats. Examples include tests, physical education class, writing on a blackboard, recitals, and oral presentations. Many shy children can navigate these social and performance situations but some cannot. Overly shy children often have problems with the following situations as well:

- Answering or talking on the telephone
- Asking others such as teachers for help
- Changing for physical education class
- Inviting others to play
- Ordering food in a restaurant or eating in public places
- Participating in group or team meetings
- Reading before others or answering questions in class
- Starting or maintaining a conversation
- Using school or public restrooms
- Walking in hallways at school or eating in the school cafeteria
- Working with others on group projects

Think for a moment about your overly shy child. Does she have trouble in these situations? Are there other situations or settings in which she has difficulty? Other situations will be covered in Chapter 2. Some shy children seem fine in some situations, especially familiar ones, but do less well in new or unfamiliar surroundings. Shy children also show different symptoms or behaviors, as described in more detail below.

The Parts of Shyness

Shyness has different parts, so let's examine each part in detail. Some people who are overly shy have *physical discomfort* when around other

people, especially people they do not know well. Recall that Isabel has headaches and stomachaches around other people. Not all shy people have physical discomfort around other people, but some do. Possible physical symptoms in overly shy children, especially when around others, include the following:

- Blushing
- Breathlessness or hyperventilation
- Dizziness
- Frequent urination or diarrhea
- Headaches and stomachaches
- Increased heart rate
- Muscle tension
- Nausea or vomiting
- Sweating
- Trembling and shaking

Keep in mind that many overly shy children do not have any physical symptoms. Your overly shy child may also have physical symptoms that are not on this list, and that is okay. Keep in mind as well that some physical nervousness is normal in many situations. Think about attending a job interview, speaking before others, or going on a blind date. All of these situations create some physical change such as increased heart rate, but most of us can control these changes or see that they ease over time. Other people have more difficulty controlling these physical symptoms.

Another part of shyness is *worrisome thoughts* a person has in social situations. Recall that overly shy people sometimes have concerns or worry about evaluations from others. Some shy people are quite anxious about what other people think of them and *worry they will be embarrassed or humiliated*. Shy people sometimes have other thoughts or concerns as well:

- Appearing foolish or nervous before others
- Being excluded from a social group
- Being ignored by others when speaking or asking for help
- Being incompetent or inadequate in a social or other way
- Being scared or harmed in some way in social situations
- Blushing
- Lack of friends and feelings of isolation from others.
- Negative evaluation or ridicule from other people
- Trouble concentrating

A third part of shyness involves *actual behavior* such as a tendency to withdraw from others or to pursue solitary activities. Many children that are overly shy, like Samantha, do not approach other children or invite them to play. Other shy children want to participate *only* in solitary activities such as playing the piano or playing by themselves. Shy children sometimes do the following:

- Avoid or escape from social situations
- Cry, throw temper tantrums, or cling to adults in social situations
- Display a shaky voice or “freeze” in social situations
- Seek frequent reassurance from others such as parents
- Show odd rituals such as twirling or shaking in social situations
- Show poor eye contact or other social skills when speaking to others

Again, the main parts of shyness are (1) possible physical symptoms, (2) worrisome thoughts about embarrassment or incompetence in social situations, and (3) actual behaviors such as withdrawal, avoiding social situations, or pursuing solitary activities. Some shy children show all three parts and some just show one or two parts—each child is different. Think about your shy child—does he mostly show physical symptoms, worrisome thoughts, avoidance behaviors, or some combination?

Types of Shyness

You may have heard other words sometimes used to describe people who are shy. The following are some different phrases related to shyness:

- *Inhibition* refers to fearfulness, timidity, avoidance, and guardedness about new situations or people.
- *Introversion* refers to a quiet and reserved nature or preference to be alone.
- *Private shyness* refers to people who have good social skills—such as eye contact and the ability to maintain a conversation—but much self-doubt.
- *Public shyness* refers to people who do not have good social skills and are very distressed in social situations.
- *Self-consciousness* refers to embarrassment from feeling that others are aware of you and are being critical of you.
- *Social withdrawal* refers to little contact with peers compared to most children of that age.

You can see there are different kinds of shyness-related types. Do any of these seem to apply to your child? If you do not see a clear type for your child, that is okay. Many children do not show a specific type of shyness or they show more than one type in different situations. A child may show good social skills but intense self-doubt in one situation and refuse to speak or play with anyone in another situation.

Is Shyness a Problem?

Shyness itself is not a problem and many people do not consider shyness to be a problem. Some people are just naturally inclined to be by themselves or have just a few friends. Shyness is *not* a problem if a child is happy, has a few close friends, does well in school, attends some social activities such as birthday parties, and participates in some group activities such as soccer. Shyness is *not* a problem if other people do not mind a person's shyness or accept that person as he is. A child could be shy during a Scout activity but the group may still view the child in a positive way. Shyness is a natural part of many people, and that is okay.

Shyness *can* be a problem, however, if a child cannot do things she might normally like to do. *Excessive shyness is the target of this book* (Fig. 1.1). Some people are so shy they cannot interact well with others and so they stay by themselves. A child like Jaden might stay to the side of a playground at recess and not interact with anyone. Other children like Evan are so shy they are constantly anxious and upset around others. A child might not be able to enjoy a friend's birthday party because he feels nervous and nauseous. Shyness may also be a problem if it interferes with activities such as sleeping, eating, playing, and going to school.

Shyness might also be a problem if other people treat the child in a certain way. If a shy child is ridiculed, maltreated, neglected, or rejected by other children, this is a problem. If a shy child will not participate in any group or social activities and cannot make friends, this is a problem. If a shy child's avoidance of school or church or other important places causes much disruption and conflict for family members, this is a problem. Shyness can also be a problem if it is associated with mental disorders that perhaps need to be addressed by a qualified mental health professional (Box 1.1).

Box 1.1 Severe behavior related to shyness

Most overly shy kids have some distress in social situations but this distress can be managed using the methods in this book. Other shy children, however, show two very severe forms of behavior called social phobia and selective mutism. These conditions are at the far right end of the social discomfort spectrum in Figure 1.1.

Social phobia refers to very intense social anxiety or fear of social situations where embarrassment may occur. People with social phobia avoid many social situations or endure social situations with great dread. Social phobia occurs in about 18% of people who are shy. Children and adolescents with social phobia often refuse to go to school, are distressed and sad in many social situations, and have poor social skills and very few friends. Social phobia can lead to several long-term problems such as dependence on others, difficulty attending college or interacting with others, and depression. Children with social phobia should receive treatment from a qualified mental health professional.

Selective mutism refers to a child's failure to speak in public situations such as school, church, restaurants, parks, and stores. Children with selective mutism speak fine at home or around people with which they are comfortable. They do not usually have speech or language problems but sometimes have developmental delays. Some kids who are shy or who have social phobia also have selective mutism, but selective mutism itself affects about 1% of children. Selective mutism is a serious disorder that may need to be treated with the help of a qualified mental health professional and school officials. Methods to address children with aspects of selective mutism are discussed throughout this book and especially in Chapter 4.

Parents sometimes think of a shy child as stubborn or noncompliant, or think of their child's shyness as attention-seeking behavior. Some shy children can be stubborn and noncompliant, and can seek attention at times, but these behaviors are not the cause of a child's shyness. Shy children are quite uncomfortable in social situations and may thus seem resistant, clingy, willful, and whiny. As your overly shy child becomes more confident in social situations, many of these behaviors will improve. A child who is confident about approaching others, for

example, will more easily go to a birthday party and will pester you less about feeling poorly.

Shy Children over Time

Shyness can be a serious issue because the behavior does increase the risk of certain problems over time. Shy children are at increased risk for anxiety disorders such as social phobia (Box 1.1) in adolescence. Shy children also tend to be lonelier than their peers over time. Adults who were shy as children tend to have unstable careers and marriages compared to most people. Men in particular tend to advance less in their careers if they are overly shy. Addressing your child's excessive shyness is thus an important goal of this book.

Consider some good news, however. Your child is not alone—many children are shy and some are overly shy, such as Tashi. Many overly shy children avoid social situations or have social skills that need improvement. Psychologists and other mental health professionals have been studying excessive shyness for decades and have a pretty good idea about how these children feel, think, and behave.

I have extensive experience working with shy and socially anxious children. I enjoy working with these children because of the great improvement they show. Excessive shyness can be managed! I have had success with many children. I have helped them lower anxiety, develop friendships, attend social gatherings, and perform well before others. This book includes specific and step-by-step methods to bring your child out of his shell and feel more confident and comfortable in social situations. You and your child can do it!

Will This Book Help Me?

This book will be more helpful for certain families than others (Table 1.1). Let's explore different topics to help you decide whether this book will be more or less helpful to you. First, this book will be more helpful if your child is actually shy! Some parents think their child is shy when actually he is not. If you are unsure, then review the definition of shyness and its parts mentioned earlier. If you feel your child is shy *and* his shyness seems to be a problem for him, then this book will be more useful to you.