

Tips on Helping Your Child to Become Less Shy



What is shyness?

Being shy is a feeling that most of us have experienced, particularly as children. You may remember at some periods in your life how uncomfortable, self-conscious or nervous you felt around others and you may have blushed, been speechless, shaky, or breathless.

Even when it's over we still feel bad. We may have felt that we didn't say the right thing, we're a failure, stupid or incompetent. Being critical of ourselves is not a very nice feeling to carry around and may have stopped us doing the things we would have liked to have done, such as hanging out with friends, having friends sleep over, go to parties, answer questions in class even when you knew the answer.

Your child may be going through this same experience though now the big difference is that you can do things to help them become less shy and more confident around others.

When does your child feel shy?

Children are more likely to feel shy when they are not sure how to act, don't know how others will react, or when attention is focused on them.

They are likely to feel more confident when they know what to expect, feel sure of what to do or say, are among familiar people or in their home environment.

What's good about being shy?

Being shy can make your child more sensitive to other people's feelings, become great listeners and be interested in how others feel. People often consider them the finest of friends.

Despite these positive attributes, many children want to feel less shy so they can have more fun socialising and comfortable and less anxious when hanging out with other kids.



Tips in helping your child

1 Overcoming shyness takes practice

Children who are shy tend to give themselves fewer opportunities to practice social interactions. The more your child practices social behaviours, the more comfortable they are in making friends and in spending time with them.

2 It's okay to feel awkward

People who are shy are often afraid to feel awkward or uncomfortable. But don't let that fear keep your child from doing what he/she wants.

3 Start small

Helping your child become less shy is more often a marathon than a sprint. Doing new things little by little can help your child become more confident and comfortable. If children feel pushed into situations they feel they are not prepared for, it can make them even more shy.

Plan for small steps that you are fairly sure that your child can achieve. Praise your child for having a go. Celebrate each step achieved and ensure that practicing is not stressful for either of you, particularly when your child is making slow progress.

4 Start a conversation

Encourage your child to talk to you about the situations that he/she feels shy and uncomfortable in and would like to change.

Many children say that the hardest part is starting to talk to someone they don't know or don't know very well. Even for adults, starting a conversation or joining in can be stressful.

Good conversation starters are safe subjects like talking about a shared interest such as computer games, sport results, school, homework. Even saying 'hello' to another child may be a big first step.

Start the game by both of you compiling a list of conversation starters that you and others use. Each of you then identify what you want to practice starting from the easiest to those more difficult. Role play, with you and your child taking turns to start a conversation. This should be fun! Wait until your child is comfortable and confident in these activities before moving to the next step. This could take a while, so be patient.

The next step is practicing conversation starters with strangers such as checkout staff, e.g., commenting on how busy or not it is. You go first and show how it's done then it's your child's turn. It doesn't have to be perfect - for either of you!

Praise your child for each small step taken when he/she agrees to play this game and has actually given it a go. Next time, it'll be even better!

5 Rehearsing what to do

If your child wants to play footy or swimming, but is reluctant to go, visit the pitch with him/her a few times and kick the ball around so he/she can get familiar with the situation well ahead of time. Go early to the first practice game before everybody else arrives and before the action begins.

If he/she wants to take swimming lessons, encourage him/her to take a couple private lessons before joining a full class, so he/she will have developed more confidence.

6 Practicing eye contact

Some children may feel unable to look directly into other people's eyes when talking or feel like they are being judged or scrutinised when making eye contact.

If real-life eye contact feels too stressful for your child, you could play a game to see who can look the longest into the eyes of characters on television, in Youtube clips, over Facetime or other video chats. If your child begins to feel uncomfortable help calm him/her down while still encouraging him/she to retain eye contact.

A real-life eye contact exercise can be talking to someone while looking at a spot directly between or slightly above the listener's eyes instead of into their eyes. The listener can vary from someone who your child knows very well, not so well, or a passing stranger, starting with the person your child is most familiar with to a person least familiar. As always, use small short steps. Allow your child to see you do this first and ensure the eye contact is not prolonged by looking away occasionally. Prolonged eye contact can make the listener uncomfortable.

7 Short, fun and enjoyable

Success in helping your child to become less shy depends on making the exercises short, fun and enjoyable activities, not only for your child, but also for you.

This tip sheet provides general information and is not intended to be a substitute for professional support. Please reach out for support if you are worried about you or your child.

References and links

<https://au.reachout.com/articles/how-to-overcome-your-shyness>

<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/HealthyLiving/shyness-and-children>

