

Can Shyness in Children be Serious?

In a very general sense you might say there are three kinds of childhood temperaments: aggressive, normal or anxious. Aggressive children have serious social skills problems, but, ironically, don't seem to be able to appreciate this fact. "Normal" kids get along reasonably well with others and are easier to like.



The most serious self-esteem problems, however, often occur in children who tend to be anxious, shy and withdrawn. A basic rule in psychology is this: as anxiety goes up, self-esteem goes down. People who are anxious are very aware of it, feel funny about it, and see others as stronger and more confident than themselves.

Shyness is especially difficult for kids. Children who are shy are often afraid that they will do the wrong thing and that others will not like them. After about age eight, when forming same-sex peer relationships is very important, shy children become more aware of their social withdrawal and feel more frustrated by it. When they hit the teen years, the frustration of this isolation can become agonizing. Unfortunately, sensitive children like this are also more reflective, and they have more time to think about themselves and their situation because they are alone so much.

Parents often tend to forget about their shy children because these kids don't bother anyone. These kids are easy to overlook when you are busy with a million other things. They aren't rebellious and they are often cooperative and helpful. They don't want to offend you or their peers. Their inner anxiety, and sometimes eventual depression, go unnoticed. To them the social part of their life is a big zero, and to them this fact drowns out whatever strengths they may have in other areas. Their internal judge starts to beat on them because of this one deficiency.

What Do Shy Kids Need?

What do these kids need? *They need an agent.* It may sound funny, but shy youngsters need a kind of social engineer who will help them make and sustain contact with other children. Many shy kids are perfectly capable of having friends, but on their own they just can't get through the initial break-in phases of a relationship. They need a parent to pick up the phone, make some calls, invite people over, do some chauffeuring and accompany them—at least for a while—to different activities. Shy kids need exposure to other children on a regular basis.

To a young child, the difference between two friends and one friend is not so huge. The difference, however, between one friend and no friends is infinite.

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