

Supporting Healthy Development in Shy Adolescents

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You notice that your child doesn't seem to have many friends and spends a lot of time at home alone shying away from sports, clubs, and dances. It's not that being alone is a preference; your child wants to be more socially active, but the thought of being with people who are not known well creates anxiety and discomfort. Does your teen anticipate the worst: that people will think he or she is not smart enough, talented enough, or cool enough? Or worry about messing up and being thought of as a loser?

Here is a list of things you can say and do to support healthy development in your "shy" adolescent:

- **Realize that shyness is not a life sentence.** Adolescence is a time of life when people become increasingly conscious of and concerned about others' perceptions of them. As a result, many teens begin to feel shy in situations where they believe that others will be observing them and developing opinions about them. Let your child know that most people feel shy at some point in their lives but a majority do not remain shy into adulthood. People change and shyness changes.
- **Refuse to be labeled.** Shyness is *not who you are* but *how you interpret and react to situations*. Shyness is really about two things: (1) how one thinks about and feels about social situations and (2) how one allows those thoughts and feelings to affect your behavior. There are no shy people, only shy reactions. A shy reaction is allowing anxiety to lead you to expect that you will not be able to handle social situations and therefore attempting to avoid those types of situations.
- **Shift focus.** Don't focus on perfection vs. failure. Instead, think of social interactions as opportunities to practice and improve your social skills. Focus on the positive. What went well? What positive feedback did you receive? How have your social skills have improved since the last time you were in a similar situation? What have you learned that you can use next time?
- **Be prepared.** Before going into a social situation, come up with a list of things to say or ask to start a conversation. Practice responses to questions that others are likely to ask. Taking time to prepare does not make a person any less competent than others to whom such things seem to come more easily. These situations will become easier with practice.
- **Emphasize quality over quantity.** Remember that participating in more social situations does not mean that you have to become a social butterfly. A few healthy, mutually beneficial relationships can be better than large numbers of superficial or one-sided relationships.
- **Find your own identity.** Explore interests and develop skills through extracurricular activities such as clubs, sports, part-time jobs, or internships. Know that people who describe themselves as uncomfortable in social situations can be found in every walk of life, including famous performing artists and CEOs. So don't limit yourself by accepting a "shy" identity.

Suggested Reading

Carducci, B. (2003). *The Shyness Breakthrough: A No-Stress Plan to Help Your Shy Child Warm Up, Open Up, and Join in the Fun*. Emmaus, PA: Rodale Books.

Carducci, B. (2000). *Shyness: A Bold New Approach*. New York: Harper Perennial.

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