

Take a Bold Approach to Shyness



Most young children are shy in some situations, such as the first day of child care or preschool. A tendency toward shyness can run in families. Some shyness in the early years is a good sign. It shows that a child knows the difference between loved ones and strangers. Shyness is a problem when it keeps children from making friends and taking part in play or other learning activities. Parents and teachers can help shy children become more comfortable in social situations.

Parents can lay the groundwork.

- Tell your child often how much you love him and how happy you are he is your child.
- Support your child in a new situation. Stay with him and let him watch a group before expecting him to join in. Tell him you understand that meeting new people can be hard.
- Role play with your child if he has difficulty. Practice what he could do or say in new situations.
- Let him know you are sure he can solve many problems on his own, but you are there if he needs you.
- Arrange times that he can play with one friendly child his age.
- Look for play opportunities with others that involve an activity he knows and feels confident doing. Perhaps he swims well or builds block structures easily.
- Notice and comment when your child is successful in a social situation that he might find uncomfortable.

Teachers play a key role.

- Avoid labeling a child as shy in front of her or other children.
- Reassure her that you are there to help. Let her know that you understand that she might feel uncomfortable in a new place or without her parents there. Say, “Sometimes it takes a while to get used to new places and people.”
- Let her watch the group for a while before encouraging her to approach another child.
- Suggest phrases to use when she wants to join in: “What are you making?” or “Can I help you with that?”
- Step in to help if she seems lost or withdrawn in your classroom. For example, suggest a specific task for her to do with another child or a group that takes advantage of her interests or strengths.
- Realize even positive public attention may make her uncomfortable. Comment to her privately when she is successful in a social situation.
- Discuss your concerns with the parents of a child who continues to be withdrawn. If ongoing shyness seems to get in the way of learning or making friends, consider consulting with a social worker or child counselor.

Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this tip sheet are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Illinois State Board of Education.



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